

***THE QUR'ĀN***  
***INSPIRED BY***  
***IDEAS***

*For the wondering soul was the world designed*  
*(While the soul was no more than a word in a book)*  
*So that what we need most is not hard to find,*  
*But is thoughtfully where we are not wont to look.*

by  
**MONT REDMOND**



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Transliteration of Arabic words in the text follows a scholarly convention of special marks for certain consonants that have no English equivalents and for long vowels.

Some consonants have dots underneath to indicate a different mode of pronunciation, as is the case with ḥ, ṣ, ḍ, ṭ, and ẓ.

‘ (‘*ain*) is the signature consonant of Arabic, and is produced from a constricted pharynx, while ’ (*hamza*) is a glottal stop.

The long vowels are ā, ī, and ū.

For further explanation, please consult the appropriate resources in print or online.

Text boxes are given letters or double letters as reference marks for linkage with the same marks inserted as superscript into the main text. Due to the limits imposed by the book’s layout, the reader may have to turn to the next page to see the text box connected to a particular passage.



# PROLOGUE



Of the many paths to God available to us today, Islam is likely to prompt the most questions and the least agreement. This is partly due to the attention of the mass media, and partly due to the extreme emotions, for and against, that such attention both reveals and promotes. As a result, it is extremely difficult to stay calm, clear, and impartial on this topic.

When I entered Islam in December 1978, I had no idea that this was what I was getting into. Islam, for me and nearly all Canadians back then, was utterly strange and exotic, characterized by old-fashioned lifestyles and stereotyped images of Arabs. And that was about it. Then, a month later, the 'Islamic Revolution' in Iran rocked the world, excited the imagination of millions of Muslims, and sparked a series of events and reactions that continue to cause alarm, fury, disgust, delight, and a thousand other shades of feeling. It may be too much to ask the reader to put all that aside, but that is exactly what I will be asking anyway.

The past forty-odd years have not really proven or changed anything about Islam, in my opinion. Recent events have shown us what some Muslims are, or have become, and what the character of the world is, perhaps, but Islam, especially as a timeless reality, is still very much a closed book to most of us, Muslims included. And now, having said that, I shall try not to mention Islam and Muslims again, unless the Qur'ān itself leads me to do so. That will not be very often, as AL-LĀH usually prefers to address us as **O mankind ...** or **O you who have believed ...**

The reason I am taking this approach is that when words with an initially rich variety of meanings become reduced to labels and slogans, they become hard and degraded, like soil that has been exposed too long to only sun and wind. The beauty of words lies in their fertility of conceptual associations, the poetry implicit in their symbolic power and misty boundaries. This is particularly true, as I hope to show, in the Arabic of the Qur'ān. The very structure of the language and the formation of its words are two potent ways by which an endless range of ideas can be seen developing out of its crystalline depths.

You do not need to be an expert in Arabic, however, to appreciate the real purpose of this book, which is to guide the reader through the theology of the Qur'ān. I intend to examine its verses, with the help of the traditions of the Messenger of AL-LĀH (GOD bless him and give him peace) and

reputable commentaries, such as that of Ibnī Kathīr, in order to elucidate or correct what I have come to believe, and to make those verses the foundation of ideas that have been debated by mankind for millennia.

Indeed, the very reason we debate these ideas is to explore possible answers, and, at some point in our lives, we would like to have those answers. Debate and discussion are excellent tools, but they are not ends in themselves. And even having the answers is not the ultimate goal; we still are obliged to put them into practice, which may require a lifetime of spiritual work and reflection on oneself and one's capacity or lack thereof to 'handle the truth.'

Early in my life, I realized that topics the wisest men of the world had been and were still debating after thousands of years would not be decided once and for all by anyone in this age, including me. I saw that mere human intelligence would never be enough to resolve these insoluble philosophical riddles. I had to get on with living, or at least learning how to live, with definite answers, for without them definite action is impossible. And so I made my leap of faith, and submitted my destiny to The One, The Encompassing, The Beginning and The End.

It was the right decision in my case, and the Qur'ān has since been better for me than a hundred university degrees or a thousand field trips. It is a journey far from over, especially since now I feel compelled to slow down and share that experience and adventure with others, such as you, the reader. This particular path of mine may not be right for you, but if it helps even one person on his or her own way (and perhaps just me), then this encounter of ours will have been a happy one.

I thank AL-LĀH for letting me live long enough to write these words, and entreat His Favour to conclude them successfully by His Mercy and Inspiration. May He guide and forgive us all.



# 1.

## KNOWING GOD



وَاعْلَمُوا أَنَّ اللَّهَ يَحُولُ بَيْنَ الْمَرْءِ وَقَلْبِهِ وَأَنَّهُ إِلَيْهِ تُحْشَرُونَ

**Know that GOD comes in between the human being and his heart, and that to Him you will be gathered. (Q8:24)<sup>1</sup>**

We know GOD better than we know ourselves.

Yes – as you read it, so I mean it. Now let me explain.

We experience our world in two main ways – the sensory and the suppersensory. (For the latter term we could say mental, psychical, or spiritual instead; each has its own problems and qualifications.)

Sensory things are objects perceived, either directly through the five human senses or indirectly through a numerical value or instrument that represents them, such as we require for the most distant galaxies and the tiniest particles. Anything in the physical realm must ‘prove’ itself by a reproducible, ‘objective’ experience or a definite quantity; many consider this to be all that reality is.

But our experience of the supersensory is just as compelling, and immeasurably so. Our subjective experiences might also be termed objects, and may be shared with others in various ways, mainly through language, but we do not sense them nor can we measure them. When we think or feel ‘love,’ for example, a brain scan may reveal the activation of certain regions or pathways of the brain, but a snapshot of that moment is not ‘love’ in any way or form. We know nonetheless what love is, or at least what it should be, and it is certainly not just an image from a machine. There is, moreover, broad agreement on what ‘love’ refers to, and we can talk meaningfully about it with those whose experience of it may vary in detail from ours.<sup>A</sup> The same is true of other non-sensory items in our experience, all

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<sup>1</sup> The translations from Arabic into English throughout this book are mine, and therefore do not always accord precisely with translations done by others. The reader, however, will find no reason to doubt their reliability.

## A

You and I could disagree, for example, about what ‘justice’ comprises. You may say that a just society should strive for equal outcomes, while I might emphasize the justice of each keeping what he/she earns, regardless of social differences. With the help of a translator, we might even carry on this discussion in different languages, using various terms for justice. Either way, the core concept – the referent we are both aiming at – can be defined in such a way that we can agree, more or less, on its denotation even as we dispute its connotation.

of which rely on language for their communication. Communicating something and knowing something are different, however. Even an illiterate deaf mute with no words at his disposal can feel and identify what we would call poverty, power, anger, trust, and so on.

Among these supersensory objects is a class of ideals and excellences, which I will call absolutes, that constitute our highest standards in all realms. We use some of these standards, such as equality and precision, to appraise objects in the physical realm. Indeed, our knowledge (another absolute) of the physical world would not be possible without them. Concepts such as justice, perfection, peace, and beauty are members of a formidable group of values that we use to appraise not only objects but also other concepts; we may even call these absolutes the ‘gods’ of our mental being. We will never encounter them directly in the physical world, but only mysteriously, through their effects on our minds and hearts. Although we may devise theories for them from psychology or anthropology, we truly cannot account for them in purely scientific terms. These are the deities – all of them demanding the highest respect and recognition by the vast majority of mankind – on which debaters rely to dispute the existence of The Supreme Deity.

Debaters appeal to truth, logic, rationality, sanity, progress, justice, morality, charity, and decency in dismissing the idea of God. I admire and agree with them, up to a point. A supreme being lacking those qualities would fall below the beautiful standards enshrined in our minds; it would be an idol, not Absolute Divinity. Only by what we regard as reasonable or fair can we convincingly condemn this or that religion. In other words, a truer, lovelier, more comprehensive supersensory absolute always defeats a baser, narrower one. We rely on superior gods to eliminate the false ones.

Viewed individually, however, each of these absolutes is incomplete. If we go on too long about justice, for example, someone might get up and exclaim, ‘But what about compassion?’ Another might object to our having ignored ‘knowledge,’ or having sacrificed ‘life’ for mere concepts. We have no choice, then, but to seek an even higher synthesis of all our standards in one Supreme Standard. Furthermore, if we take them as a whole, we realize that the culmination, harmonization, and integration of all these absolutes in One would also have to possess perfect power, intelligence, and compassion to implement comprehensive justice, for example, and be infinite and eternal to ensure those values’ consistency for all times and places. Each absolute demands another, and ultimately all the rest at once, if our loyalty is to be complete and lasting. These separate standards or values can only cohere in One Personal-Suprapersonal Absolute – our ideal true GOD.<sup>B</sup> Not the sectarian God of this or that religion, as people generally understand the word, but the Authority Who legitimizes the valid criticism of all lesser gods and speaks to each of us, even today, through our limitless passion for truth and morality.

#### B

Throughout this book, I refer to GOD, The One Absolute Deity Who comprehends (and transcends) all absolutes; God, the monotheistic Deity Who represents the traditional object of worship in various religions; and a god, any idol that haunts and drives us even when we think we are not remotely motivated by religion.

GOD The Transcendent has no gender. I use masculine singular pronouns, however, to refer to ‘Him’ in deference to traditional usage in Arabic and English, as both languages lack gender-neutral third-person pronouns, and ‘It’ is unworthy of One Whose Personality is greater than our own.

It is in this sense that I can claim we know GOD better than we know ourselves. I do not mean to say that we apprehend GOD as He truly is, but that our awareness of Him is nonetheless greater than our self-awareness. Our recognition of ‘beautiful,’ ‘true,’ ‘just,’ and so on is innate, simple, and direct; we perceive these absolutes in our hearts, and we identify them instantly and consistently throughout our lives. But ourselves? There is nothing simple or direct about who we are, or even if we are. Some of the same people who deny the existence of God refute, with more reason, the reality of a single or persistent self in this complex, ever-changing jumble

of physical, mental, and emotional phenomena that we call a human being. GOD, in comparison, is clear and obvious. <sup>C</sup>

**C**

In other words, if we can agree on what absolutes such as love, reason, and justice denote, then their totality under The Absolute All should likewise be at least conceptually clear, even if we cannot comprehend GOD in His infinite possession of all absolutes. This, by the way, helps to overcome the old conundrum of the relationship between ‘good’ and ‘God’: are there goods that are inherently so, regardless of what God decrees, or is something good only because God made it so? When God and good are considered to be two different things, this type of question makes sense. But I would contend that all good is necessarily a manifestation of GOD, and inseparable from Him. Good = GOD-like or GOD-approved. Thus, the above question would be like asking, “Is the wetness of the ocean due to the intrinsic characteristics of water, regardless of the ocean’s nature, or did the ocean make it so?” Posed like this, the question becomes mere nonsense.

سُرِّيهِمْ آيَاتِنَا فِي الْأَفَاقِ وَفِي أَنْفُسِهِمْ حَتَّى يَتَبَيَّنَ لَهُمْ أَنَّهُ الْحَقُّ أَوَلَمْ يَكْفِ بِرَبِّكَ أَنَّهُ عَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ شَهِيدٌ

**We shall manifest to them Our signs on the horizons and within themselves until it is apparent to them that He is The Truth. Is it not sufficient that your Lord is Witness over everything? (Q41:53)**

Notice how the dual realms of the sensory, such as the horizons, and the supersensory, **within themselves**, are continuously ‘updated’ with **Our signs**. Just as there is progress in the field of objective physical knowledge, so should there be development in our subjective ability to see GOD’s signs where no one else can see them. The realization that all of this witnessing of ours has a Witness suffices ... for what? For replacing our ego as the all-knowing ‘centre’ of our experience.

وَفِي الْأَرْضِ آيَاتٌ لِلْمُوقِنِينَ  
وَفِي أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَفَلَا تُبْصِرُونَ  
وَفِي السَّمَاءِ رِزْقُكُمْ وَمَا تُوعَدُونَ  
فَوَرَبِّ السَّمَاءِ وَالْأَرْضِ إِنَّهُ لَحَقٌّ مِثْلَ مَا أَنَّكُمْ تَنْطِقُونَ

**And in the earth are signs for those who are convinced, / And in yourselves. Do you not see? / And in the sky is your provision and what you are promised. / By The Lord of heaven and of earth, indeed it [the Resurrection] is as real as the fact that you are speaking. (Q51:20–23)**

Notice how the personal experience of being **in yourselves** and **speaking** is interwoven with the references to natural signs of GOD such as the earth and the heavens. GOD's Power, Judgement, and Mercy are not just 'out there,' which is what we feel when we think of His Transcendence, but also 'in here,' or immanent.

وَلَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ وَنَعْلَمُ مَا تُوَسْوِسُ بِهِ نَفْسُهُ وَنَحْنُ أَقْرَبُ إِلَيْهِ مِنْ  
حَبْلِ الْوَرِيدِ

**Truly We created man; We know what his own self is whispering. And We are closer to him than his jugular vein. (Q50:16)**

This nearness is not a physical presence, but the nearness of knowledge. If we want to know 'where' GOD is, this is the answer – an almost tongue-in-cheek response. But where is man's own self? How do we locate that? It is not GOD we have lost, after all, but ourselves.

وَإِذَا سَأَلَكَ عِبَادِي عَنِّي فَإِنِّي قَرِيبٌ أُجِيبُ دَعْوَةَ الدَّاعِي إِذَا دَعَانِي  
And when My servants question you concerning Me, then truly I am Near. I answer to the call of the suppliant when he calls on Me. (Q2:186)

Here we have the closeness of GOD expressed in terms of intimacy, immediacy, and responsiveness. There is no question here of knowing the words or speaking a particular language. And there is no need for an intermediary or personal substitute. If we call on someone else, of course, we have to wait, and wonder whether our prayer has been heard. But GOD's answer must be something that anyone can understand – directly, in one's heart.

يَقُولُ اللَّهُ تَعَالَى أَنَا عِنْدَ ظَنِّ عَبْدِي بِي وَأَنَا مَعَهُ إِذَا ذَكَرَنِي  
AL-LĀH The Most High says: "I am present at the thought My servant has of Me, and I am with him when he remembers Me."  
(Ṣaḥīḥul-Bukhārī, Book 97, Ḥadīth 34)

Even when they concede its authenticity, modern-day literalist scholars might find this *hadīth* so uncomfortably close, and the wording so bold, that they would need some device to explain it away. What stronger statement could there be of GOD's Immanence and what our condition must be to become aware of that? It is not that GOD comes and goes as we think of Him or not, but rather it is we who flicker on and off, coming to and going from Him as we remember or forget.

أَلَا بِذِكْرِ اللَّهِ تَطْمَئِنُّ الْقُلُوبُ

**Truly by remembering AL-LĀH do hearts become serene. (Q13:28)**

The tranquillity possessed by GOD takes its place in our hearts by re-membering. And remembering anything can only occur as the result of a prior experience. We have known GOD, but that knowledge seems to be buried and forgotten. What exactly are we forgetting?

وَإِذْ أَخَذَ رَبُّكَ مِنْ بَنِي آدَمَ مِنْ ظُهُورِهِمْ ذُرِّيَّتَهُمْ وَأَشْهَدَهُمْ عَلَى أَنْفُسِهِمْ أَلَسْتُ بِرَبِّكُمْ قَالُوا بَلَى شَهِدْنَا

**And when your Lord extracted from the spines of Ādam's offspring their descendants and He made them witnesses against themselves [by asking] “Am I not your Lord?” they said, “Indeed, we witness [your being Lord].” (Q7:172)**

Notice that the question is not about who we are, but Who He is. It is this memory of a Supreme Good demanding our response – our responsibility, in fact – that informs all our ethical concerns and moral judgements. It also constitutes our original pure nature, or *fiṭrah* – an inner reference point that gives us an uncanny confidence in making decisions about right and wrong.

فَأَقِمْ وَجْهَكَ لِلدِّينِ حَنِيفًا فِطْرَةَ اللَّهِ الَّتِي فَطَرَ النَّاسَ عَلَيْهَا لَا تَبْدِيلَ لِخَلْقِ اللَّهِ ذَلِكَ الدِّينُ الْقَيِّمُ وَلَكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ النَّاسِ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ

**So focus your intent entirely upon the Law of Faith – the nature of AL-LĀH by which He made humanity. There is no alteration in what GOD creates. That is the valid Law of Faith; but most of mankind does not know. (Q30:30)**

What most of us do not know is how this innate presence of GOD is connected to our daily lives, or how it translates into spiritual insight or

acts of piety. What all of us do know is that there must be Something, Somewhere, no matter what we call it. That is the echo of our nature in our minds – the echo of our affinity with AL-LĀH. This affinity has been with humanity for the start, and its promise of the ultimate discovery is eternal. The discovery may be a long process of steady growth, or a sudden reversal of perspective like the question in the Zen *koan*: ‘What did your face look like before your parents were born?’

وَلِلَّهِ الْمَشْرِقُ وَالْمَغْرِبُ فَأَيْنَمَا تُولُّوا فَثَمَّ وَجْهُ اللَّهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ وَاسِعٌ عَلِيمٌ

**To GOD belong the east and west, and so whichever way you turn – there! The Face of GOD. Verily AL-LĀH is Comprehensive, Knowing. (Q2:115)**

The face is an interface – a medium by which inner realities are expressed and the observer ‘sees’ a personality. As we are now, we can never penetrate to the depths of the Absolute, but we can interact with One Who embraces us, knows us, and made us precisely for this interaction.

So how do we experience this Personal–Suprapersonal Absolute we call AL-LĀH or GOD? And what descriptive language does He employ to clarify, enliven, and endear this experience to us?

## 2.

# GOD IS LIGHT



اللَّهُ نُورُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ

**AL-LĀH is The Light of the heavens and the earth. (Q24:35)**

Statements like this in the Qur'ān are plain metaphors, whereby two referents that are not identical are nonetheless said to be so, but only to express their resemblance. If AL-LĀH had no sense of poetry, or condemned its use, such freedom of expression would be categorically forbidden. But He deliberately engages our imaginations, urging us to look around and find things in the world that remind us of Him. This, in itself, is an act of illumination, of Light in language.

We are light-seeking creatures, like indoor flowers that instinctively turn and grow towards the nearest sign of sunshine. Our world is primarily a visual one, and our thoughts naturally coalesce around pictures when we strive to understand what words can only dimly convey. Because we are so keen to see, we even learn to make do with the muted shades of darkness that surround us, and then come to prefer their subtle hues to plain white light. Finally, we end up loving, not Light itself, but what we see – manifestations of ourselves and our limited capacities.

The symbolic language of the Qur'ān helps to cut through this undergrowth and present us with the shining heart of the Divine, directly and concisely, and make it familiar and memorable. We labour under the impression that we do not know GOD. But almost all of us 'know' light; the single word serves to evoke a wide range of images and recollections. Suddenly, it is as if the Invisible GOD appears before us ... in our heart's eye. And on the Day of Resurrection, the final veil is removed.

عَنْ عَبْدِ اللَّهِ بْنِ شَقِيقٍ قَالَ قُلْتُ لِأَبِي ذَرٍّ لَوْ رَأَيْتُ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ صَلَّى  
اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ لَسَأَلْتُهُ فَقَالَ عَنْ أَيِّ شَيْءٍ كُنْتَ تَسْأَلُهُ قَالَ كُنْتُ أَسْأَلُهُ  
هَلْ رَأَيْتَ رَبَّكَ قَالَ أَبُو ذَرٍّ قَدْ سَأَلْتُ فَقَالَ رَأَيْتُ نُورًا



*From ‘Abdil-Lāhibni Shaqīq, who said, “I said to Abī Dharr, ‘If I had met the Messenger of GOD (may AL-LĀH bless him and give him peace), I would have asked him [something].’ He said, ‘What would you have asked him?’ He [sic] said, ‘I would have asked him, “Have you seen your Lord?”” Abū Dharr replied, ‘I asked him [that], and he said, “I saw a light.””*

*(Ṣaḥīḥu Muslim, Book 1, Ḥadīth 351)*

عَنْ أَبِي ذَرٍّ قَالَ سَأَلْتُ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ هَلْ رَأَيْتَ رَبَّكَ قَالَ نُورٌ أَنَّى أَرَاهُ

*From Abī Dharr, who said, “I asked the Messenger of GOD (may GOD bless him and give him peace), ‘Have you seen your Lord?’ He replied, ‘[It was] a light. How could I see Him?’”*

*(Ṣaḥīḥu Muslim, Book 1, Ḥadīth 350)*

From the first of these two narrations, 351, we learn that **light** is how GOD manifests himself to mortal man, and even to the best of men. And in the second, 350, we are told that there is nothing more of Him that can be seen, at least in this life, and that He is not the same as whatever light we see.

أَنَّ نَاسًا فِي زَمَنِ رَسُولِ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ قَالُوا يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ هَلْ نَرَى رَبَّنَا يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ نَعَمْ قَالَ هَلْ تُضَارُّونَ فِي رُؤْيَاةِ الشَّمْسِ بِالظَّهِيرَةِ صَحْوًا لَيْسَ مَعَهَا سَحَابٌ وَهَلْ تُضَارُّونَ فِي رُؤْيَاةِ الْقَمَرِ لَيْلَةً الْبَدْرُ صَحْوًا لَيْسَ فِيهَا سَحَابٌ قَالُوا لَا يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ قَالَ مَا تُضَارُّونَ فِي رُؤْيَاةِ اللَّهِ تَبَارَكَ وَتَعَالَى يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ إِلَّا كَمَا تُضَارُّونَ فِي رُؤْيَاةِ أَحَدِهِمَا

*Some people in the time of the Messenger of GOD (may AL-LĀH bless him and give him peace) said, “Shall we see our Lord on the Day of Resurrection?” He (may AL-LĀH bless him and give him peace) replied, “Yes. Do you have trouble seeing the sun at noon, in a clear sky without clouds? And do you have trouble seeing the full moon at night, in a clear sky without clouds?” They replied, “No, O Messenger of AL-LĀH.” He said, “You will have no trouble seeing AL-LĀH the Blessed and Most High on the Day of Resurrection just as you have no trouble seeing one of them.”*

*(Ṣaḥīḥu Muslim, Book 1, Ḥadīth 361)*

This sight of AL-LĀH is by ‘*ainil-yaqīn* – the ‘eye of certainty’ that reveals not only the delights of Paradise but also the horrors of Hell.

What can be said about the nature of physical light?

1. It is a form of energy.
2. It appears to have an external source.
3. It has intensity.
4. It makes things visible to organs developed to respond to light, such as the human eye.
5. It has direction.

There are many more properties, of course, but these should suffice to convey the aptness of light as a symbol of GOD.

1. The following is a prayer often mentioned among the customary invocations of the Prophet (may AL-LĀH bless him and give him peace):

اللَّهُمَّ اجْعَلْ فِي قَلْبِي نُورًا وَفِي لِسَانِي نُورًا وَاجْعَلْ فِي سَمْعِي نُورًا  
وَاجْعَلْ فِي بَصَرِي نُورًا وَاجْعَلْ مِنْ خَلْفِي نُورًا وَمِنْ أَمَامِي نُورًا  
وَاجْعَلْ مِنْ فَوْقِي نُورًا وَمِنْ تَحْتِي نُورًا اللَّهُمَّ أَعْظِنِي نُورًا

*O AL-LĀH, put light in my heart and light on my tongue; put light in my hearing; put light in my sight; put light behind me and light before me; put light above me and light below me. O AL-LĀH, give me light.*

(*Ṣaḥīḥu Muslim, Book 6, Ḥadīth 227*)

Other similar prayers mention *light in my hair, and light in my skin, and light in my flesh, and light in my blood, and light in my bones*. Clearly, the meaning of *light* here is not restricted to ordinary physical and visible light. In the same way that literal light was not intended in the tradition above, the tradition below should not be understood as proof of literal incarnation.

عَنْ أَبِي هُرَيْرَةَ قَالَ قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ قَالَ  
مَنْ عَادَى لِي وَلِيًّا فَقَدْ آذَنْتُهُ بِالْحَرْبِ وَمَا تَقَرَّبَ إِلَيَّ عَبْدِي بِشَيْءٍ  
أَحَبَّ إِلَيَّ مِمَّا افْتَرَضْتُ عَلَيْهِ وَمَا يَزَالُ عَبْدِي يَتَقَرَّبُ إِلَيَّ بِالنَّوَافِلِ  
حَتَّى أُحِبَّهُ فَإِذَا أَحْبَبْتُهُ كُنْتُ سَمْعَهُ الَّذِي يَسْمَعُ بِهِ وَبَصَرَهُ الَّذِي  
يُبْصِرُ بِهِ وَيَدَهُ الَّتِي يَبْطِشُ بِهَا وَرِجْلَهُ الَّتِي يَمْشِي بِهَا وَإِنْ سَأَلَنِي  
لَا أُعْطِيَنَّهُ وَلَئِنْ اسْتَعَاذَنِي لَا أُعِذَّنَّهُ

*From Abī Hurairah, who said, “The Messenger of AL-LĀH, (may GOD bless him and give him peace) said, ‘Verily GOD has spoken, “Against whoever antagonizes a friend of Mine I declare war. My servant does not approach Me with anything more loved to me than what I have obliged him to do. And My servant continues to get close to Me by supererogatory deeds until I love him. When I love him, I am his hearing by which he hears, and his sight by which he sees, and his hand by which he strikes, and his foot by which he walks. If he entreated Me, I would surely grant him [his request]. And if he sought protection from Me, I would surely protect him.”’”*

*(Ṣāḥīḥul-Bukhārī, Book 81, Ḥadīth 91)*

In these traditions, we see hyperbole and metaphor as mnemonic devices for conveying a concept too difficult to fathom, namely how the Infinite Divine interacts with and is involved in the mortal and finite. Reaching for some term to express this Presence, we might call it the spiritual energy of Authenticity. A *friend* of AL-LĀH is someone who loves Him and is loved by Him in an act of mutual validation and intimate communion. In terms of light, we could say that AL-LĀH ‘shines’ through his beloved servant like the rays of the sun through glass; the more transparent the glass is, the less visible it is in itself, and the brighter and stronger does the Light of GOD appear to be.

2. In speaking of AL-LĀH in this way, we balance on a knife’s edge between two contradictory tendencies, each of which can damage our faith if not counteracted by the other. On the one hand, we have to beware of our mind’s need to identify Him with our intellectual images of Him, including those that arise from such terms as **Light**, **Witness**, and **Near**. On the other hand, AL-LĀH Himself uses these terms for a reason, namely to prevent us from dismissing Him from our hearts as irrelevant, inaccessible, and impersonal. We say “*subḥānaL-LĀH*” (Transcendent is AL-LĀH) to dispel the former error, and “*al-ḥamdu lil-LĀH*” (Praise be to AL-LĀH) to avoid the latter. “*AL-LĀHU akbar*” (AL-LĀH is Greater / Greatest) is rather like an amalgamation of these two, as it affirms both His Transcendence (i.e., so much greater conceptually as to be incomparable) and His Immediacy (i.e., so much more important as to be dearer to us than our own selves) at the same time. The paradox is neatly conveyed in this verse:

لَيْسَ كَمِثْلِهِ شَيْءٌ وَهُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْبَصِيرُ

**There is no thing like unto Him, and He is Hearing, Seeing. (Q42:11)**

3. This tension between GOD's being both relatable and unrelatable to man cannot be resolved definitely either way; the ardent, honest worshipper must honour both of these claims – the intellectual and the emotional – strenuously clearing images out of his mind while filling his heart with as many ties to the Divine as he can. One way that accomplishes both is to imagine a Reality Who would literally blow your mind, thus affirming and negating the image simultaneously – an impossible feat!

وَلَمَّا جَاءَ مُوسَى لِمِيقَاتِنَا وَكَلَّمَهُ رَبُّهُ قَالَ رَبِّ أَرْنِي إِلَيْكَ قَالَ  
لَنْ تَرَانِي وَلَكِنْ انْظُرْ إِلَى الْجَبَلِ فَإِنِ اسْتَقَرَّ مَكَانَهُ فَسَوْفَ تَرَانِي  
فَلَمَّا تَجَلَّى رَبُّهُ لِلْجَبَلِ جَعَلَهُ دَكًّا وَخَرَّ مُوسَى صَعِقًا فَلَمَّا أَفَاقَ قَالَ  
سُبْحَانَكَ تُبْتُ إِلَيْكَ وَأَنَا أَوَّلُ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ

When Mūsā came to Our appointment, and His Master spoke with him, he said, “O Master, let me see You.” He replied, “You shall not see Me. Look, though, at the mountain; if it keeps its place, then you will see Me.” When his Lord appeared before the mountain, He disintegrated it, and Mūsā fell unconscious. Then, when he awoke, he said, “How gloriously far Beyond You are! I turn repentant unto You, and I am foremost of the faithful.” (Q7:143)

Just as the heat and light we find comfortable in our daily lives are but faint imitations of the extreme conditions at the surface of the sun, so are our familiar absolutes, such as rationality, justice, and beauty, mere faded vestiges of the overpowering Absolute Totality that is GOD in all His Glory. We are not designed to handle any of His Qualities at any intensity beyond our narrow comfort zone.

إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَنَامُ وَلَا يَنْبَغِي لَهُ أَنْ يَنَامَ يَخْفُضُ الْقِسْطَ وَيَرْفَعُهُ حِجَابُهُ  
النُّورُ لَوْ كَشَفَهَا لَأُخْرِقَتْ سُبُحَاتُ وَجْهِهِ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ أَدْرَكَهُ بَصَرُهُ

*Verily AL-LĀH does not sleep, nor does it befit Him to sleep. He lowers the Scale [of Justice] and raises it. His Veil is Light. If He removed it, the glory of His Countenance would burn everything on which He gazed.*

*(Sunanub-ni Mājah, Book 1, Ḥadīth 201)*

What does *His Veil is Light* mean? The clearest example I can think of is that of the sun and the stars. Most of the stars visible to the naked eye in the night sky are immensely larger and brighter than our sun, but appearing as pinpoints to our sight they are easily extinguished at dawn by

the simple fact that the sun is closer. And so a lesser light can ‘hide’ a greater one.

This veiling, indispensable to our existence in this material world, can be considered from two points of view. We can say that The Light, *An-Nūr*, is ‘hiding’ behind veils of His own Light, which means that He, The Inward, *Al-Bāṭin*, is also manifest as The Outward, *Az-Zāhir*, in His Veils – the absolutes (knowledge, love, et cetera) that brighten our lives now.

نُورٌ عَلَى نُورٍ

### Light upon Light! (24:35)

If, however, we think in terms of what blocks our vision of The Divine, we can say that we are veiled by our regard for these absolutes as our gods, as adequate substitutes for The Total Absolute, or by considering them to be human products rather than manifestations of AL-LĀH.

4. But while these veils screen GOD’s Light in its totality from us, they enable us to survive as beings of limited sight, and thus to observe toned-down or coloured versions of that Light, mixed with darkness in various proportions, according to our varying capacities. The more gifted are better able to differentiate between light and darkness in this twilight realm of ambiguity and its shades of grey. Some, overvaluing their capacity for undiminished Light, insist on whiteness and strict distinctions where they cannot be found. Others, resigned to darkness, undervalue the importance of Light and reject GOD altogether. But the most perceptive turn naturally and easily to what is brightest in their lives without denying the temporary necessity of veils, hues, nuances, and darkness in this world.

يَهْدِي اللَّهُ لِنُورِهِ مَنْ يَشَاءُ وَيَضْرِبُ اللَّهُ الْأَمْثَالَ لِلنَّاسِ وَاللَّهُ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمٌ

**AL-LĀH guides whom He wills towards His Light. AL-LĀH sets forth for mankind allegories, and AL-LĀH is One Who Knows all things. (Q24:35)**

5. The Knowledge of AL-LĀH does not only ‘see,’ as with human knowledge, but actively draws mere existence out of its dark potentiality into the light of upward Life.

إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَزَّ وَجَلَّ خَلَقَ خَلْقَهُ فِي ظُلْمَةٍ فَأَلْقَى عَلَيْهِمْ مِنْ نُورِهِ فَمَنْ أَصَابَهُ مِنْ ذَلِكَ النُّورِ اهْتَدَى وَمَنْ أَخْطَأَهُ ضَلَّ

*Verily AL-LĀH The Mighty and Glorious created His creatures in darkness, then He cast His Light upon them. Those on whom that Light fell have been guided, and those who missed it have gone astray.*

*(Jāmi'ut-Tirmidhī, Book 40, Ḥadīth 37)*

We might say that Light has two directions – ‘downwards,’ from Him to us, as in revelation –

فَآمِنُوا بِاللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ وَالنُّورِ الَّذِي أَنْزَلْنَا وَاللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ خَبِيرٌ

**So believe in GOD, His Messenger, and the Light that We sent down. And GOD, concerning what you do, is Well Informed. (Q64:8)**

– and ‘upwards,’ from us to Him, as in the guidance that illuminates our hearts.

اللَّهُ وَلِيُّ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا يُخْرِجُهُم مِّنَ الظُّلُمَاتِ إِلَى النُّورِ وَالَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا أُولَئِكَ هُمُ الطَّاغُوتُ يُخْرِجُونَهُم مِّنَ النُّورِ إِلَى الظُّلُمَاتِ

**AL-LĀH befriends those who have faith; He takes them out of darkness into Light. As for those who have rejected faith, their friends are idols, taking them from Light into the dark. (Q2:257)**

One would think that nothing could be mistaken for Light, and that its clarity would be proof against deception and misguidance. But at a time when even GOD is considered by some to be a symbol of ignorance, oppression, and almost all the evils of the world, one should not be surprised to find a bewildering host of counterfeits masquerading as Light. In the Western Christian tradition, Lucifer, ‘the light-bearer,’ was taken to be the proper name of Satan himself before ‘the fall.’ Nowadays, brilliance is considered the property of geniuses, not saints, and the ‘Enlightenment’ is always associated with the loss of faith and religious values and the advent of one particular form of reason.

How, then, can we tell the Light of GOD from other lights? What is Light, and what is Fire?

لَا تَسْتَضِيئُوا بِنَارِ الْمُشْرِكِينَ

**Do not seek light from the fire of the polytheists.**

*(Sunanun-Nasā'ī, Book 48, Ḥadīth 170)*

Emphasis on one absolute can lead us to neglect the rest, and thus to stray further from the Wholeness that is GOD.<sup>D</sup> Let us examine other ways that can help us discern the nature of His Light.

**D**

In speaking of plural qualities or characteristics of GOD I am once again stepping into metaphorical territory. It bears repeating, and should be constantly kept in mind, that the multiplicity of GOD's Names is useful emotionally, as a means to bind our inconstant hearts to the task of remembering Him. These pragmatic instruments of spiritual connection are condoned by GOD Himself in the Qur'ān, but they have the limits that all language must have. AL-LĀH is fundamentally and absolutely One – a Unity that cannot be reduced to any trace of number, divisibility, or extension. He is not a composite or conglomerate, and even to speak of Divine personalities or aspects, as Christian trinitarians are compelled to do with their talk of Father, Son, and Spirit, poses an imminent danger of polytheism. We must never confuse our feeble attempts to imagine His Qualities, however they are named, with His essential Unicity – a Oneness that simultaneously transcends our highest abstractions and is too minutely involved with us to be ignored for even a fraction of a moment.

### 3.

## THE LIGHT OF GOD IN LIFE, LOVE, POWER, TRUTH, AND PEACE



We are just beginning to look at how AL-LĀH uses symbolic language to make Himself relatable to us. I need to stress again that we are not describing GOD. We are not capable of doing so adequately, nor, in any case, is He an object that can be described in total. He uses metaphors, such as **The Light of the heavens and the earth**, to point our thoughts in particular directions; but as with spotlights shining up into a clear sky, we never see the end of them. There is no solid object there to receive these rays and reflect them back to where we stand and watch. And so not one of these concepts defines Who GOD is. Rather they are only tools GOD employs to engage us in the quest for His Ineffable Presence. As such, any pair of symbols, Divine Forgiveness and Divine Vengeance, for example, can be as contradictory as the awareness that the same substance you drink to stay alive at home can drown you at sea. I will have more to say about this necessary ambiguity in Chapter 4.

### THE LIVING GOD

Against the vast backdrop of virtually empty space, stellar furnaces, giant blobs of gas, and desolate planets of rock and ice, life in this universe is truly an anomaly. Its apparent rarity qualifies it for the status of miraculous. Organisms are waging a desperate struggle against extremes of heat and cold and deadly cosmic rays and, at a local level, here on Earth at least, seem to have made some progress. We are so accustomed to life around us, in all its cacophonous diversity, we tend to forget how strange and wonderful it is in this otherwise trackless expanse of quiet darkness. We should be gasping, if not for air, then certainly with surprise on waking up



and finding ourselves, once again, in an environment friendly to human life and the writing of books, among other things.

Light itself is a miracle, even as scientists tend to render it commonplace by their equations and formulas. Life, however, is another matter altogether, and not just another matter; it utilizes matter and thus transcends it, giving us something incalculable and inexplicable. And so if GOD is ever going to be more than just a concept to us – Someone Who is Incalculable and Inexplicable, just as we are – He has to be Alive.

وَتَوَكَّلْ عَلَى الْحَيِّ الَّذِي لَا يَمُوتُ وَسَبِّحْ بِحَمْدِهِ وَكَفَى بِهِ بِذُنُوبِ  
عِبَادِهِ خَبِيرًا

**And rely upon the Living One Who does not die, and glorify and praise Him. He suffices as Cognizant of His servants' sins. (Q25:58)**

But how can we understand a life that is not subject to death, nor birth, nor growth, nor change? Our entire concept of life is inextricably bound up with time and change ... yet AL-LĀH is Timeless and Unchanging. How does a life without time or change even make sense?

The simple answer is that it does not – to us. Life is a symbol or sign of AL-LĀH, in the same way that He is not physical light, but elects to represent Himself to us as Light. More precisely, He describes Himself as The Living (al-Ḥayy) and The Enlivening (al-Muḥyī), but not as Life (*ḥayāt*) itself, probably because we humans cannot imagine life without birth and death, both of which are irreconcilable with The Eternally Divine. In interactions among ourselves, we do not speak or listen to Life, appreciate Patience and Gratitude, fear Vengeance, and seek advice from Guidance; rather we engage with living persons who are patient or grateful, and who may be alternately powerful enough to hurt us or wise enough to help us. Life in the abstract does not elicit a response from us; our dealings are always with the living – particular possessors of life. Life is the stage on which these beings, including ourselves, appear.

If Life is the general category in which living beings occur, then how is AL-LĀH, The Living, 'above' Life? He 'lives' by being the single Unifier of all categories – the ultimate unpossessed Possessor of every positive value, such as love, power, truth, peace, and life itself. We, His creatures, are raised into life, whereas He raises Life into a manifestation of a greater whole, namely His Divinity. From this perspective, all life is divine – and hence worthy of respect – because it ultimately derives from a Divine Quality more precious than the mere power to create and holier than Life itself. Likewise, at the lower level of life in this world, we do not so much

‘have’ life as we are lifted into it by an act of GOD, and participate in it as something greater and worthier than ourselves.

## WHOM GOD LOVES

GOD’s Life is incomprehensible to us because it is absolute and unconditional, whereas our lives are bounded by birth and death and dependent upon innumerable circumstances. GOD’s Love, however, expands His symbolic range in a completely different direction.

We have to recognize here that ‘love,’ like ‘will,’ is best used as a verb. That is because the quality of love is determined not only by the lover but also by its object, by its ‘beloved.’ Love is a moral act, an act that is deliberate and selective. AL-LĀH is Kind and Generous with humanity in general, but His Love has to be discerning and focused if it is to mean anything to those whom He loves. He does not love indiscriminately; rather His Love is manifested in mutuality – in those who love Him. Just as a man who loves all women equally cannot be said to love his wife in any way that matters to her, so is GOD’s Love a prize to be striven for and treasured rather than a birthright dispensed to all and sundry regardless of merit.

Strangely enough, though the boundless Life of GOD seems remote from what we experience as life, the Love of an Infinite, Eternal Deity for particular mortals does not jar our sense of fittingness, given what we know about love. Perhaps we expect love to be illogical or paradoxical, since it rarely can be justified by any other standard but its own. There is something divine in how powerful and transformative love can be, and how freely it goes about its own business without regard for any other measure. The mysteries of love are, for many people, the most convincing proof of GOD’s involvement in the world, as nothing but the Supremely Transcendent could possibly explain the everyday presence of the unexplainable.

عَنْ سَلْمَانَ قَالَ قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ خَلَقَ يَوْمَ  
خَلَقَ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ مِائَةَ رَحْمَةٍ كُلُّ رَحْمَةٍ طَبَاقٍ مَا بَيْنَ  
السَّمَاءِ وَالْأَرْضِ فَجَعَلَ مِنْهَا فِي الْأَرْضِ رَحْمَةً فَبِهَا تَعْطِفُ الْوَالِدَةُ  
عَلَى وَلَدِهَا وَالْوَحْشُ وَالطَّيْرُ بَعْضُهَا عَلَى بَعْضٍ فَإِذَا كَانَ يَوْمُ  
الْقِيَامَةِ أَكْمَلَهَا بِهَذِهِ الرَّحْمَةِ

***From Salmān, who said that the Messenger of AL-LĀH (may God bless him and give him peace) said, “Verily AL-LĀH, on the day He made the heavens and the earth, created one hundred mercies, each mercy filling all that is from heaven to earth. Of them, He put one mercy on earth. By it, a mother shows affection to her child, and animals and birds are gentle with one another. On the Day of Resurrection, these mercies are expressed by Him in full.”***

***(Ṣaḥīḥu Muslim, Ḥadīth 2753c)***

Divine Love is thus well within its right to leap over the boundary between the infinite and the finite, between the eternal and the mortal, and to draw the greatest good in worldly life into the ambit of the everlasting. Somehow, we know that love in the form of Mercy is far more profound and awesome than the mere workings of biological drives and animal instincts. Divine Love is one of the most beautiful absolutes we have all experienced in some form or another. GOD personifies it; He is its source. But why is He not named as Love (*ḥubb* or *wadd*) in the Qur’ān?

AL-LĀH is not identified as Love for the same reason that He is not described as Praise or Praising. (Rather He is The Praised or Praiseworthy, the object of praise). Love and praise are actions whose ambivalence, whose capacity for both good and evil, or truth and falsehood, are part of their very nature. We tend to think of love as all positive, but it is not. The worship of gods other than AL-LĀH is an example of misplaced love, false reverence, and damnable praise. Light and life are absolutes that need no moral qualification to be applicable to GOD, but love, while totally beautiful when it comes from GOD or is returned to Him, produces all sorts of mischief and sin when idolized alone, regardless of its attributes and circumstances, as it seems to be nowadays in secular society.

## DIVINELY MOVING

Just as the Light of AL-LĀH may be said to be life-giving in its activity, and benevolent in its intent, so can we identify the Might of AL-LĀH as Light that empowers. Modern Western readers have no problem with GOD as Light, for we are used to the transmissible qualities of luminescence, which can be borrowed, reflected, and reproduced, as when we light one candle from another. GOD as Life or as Love has the same positive connotation, for both attributes are gifts, and can even grow by being shared. But when we come to power and its particularly Western, individualistic manifestation as ‘willpower,’ our minds turn not to multiplication but to

division. Power seems for us to be a finite amount which, if taken by one, is lost by another. We speak of a balance of power, of power vacuums, and of struggles for power. All of these concepts tend to place Divinity in opposition to man, and GOD's Power over us begins to feel like a loss of independence. How different this Light appears, then, when expressed as Power rather than Life or Love!

If we have developed a suspicion of or resentment towards people or institutions that have power over us or seek to control us, we need to remind ourselves that such entities may be striving to limit or diminish our power, whereas AL-LĀH is The Original and Ultimate Empowerer. Without Him, we would not exist, let alone have power of our own. He has created this world to facilitate our empowerment, and every use of our power manifests His prior Power, just as our knowledge expresses His Foreknowledge and our mercy both reiterates and foreshadows His greater Mercy.

وَسَخَّرَ لَكُمُ الْفُلْكَ لِتَجْرِيَ فِي الْبَحْرِ بِأَمْرِهِ وَسَخَّرَ لَكُمُ الْأَنْهَارَ  
وَسَخَّرَ لَكُمُ الشَّمْسَ وَالْقَمَرَ دَآئِبَيْنِ وَسَخَّرَ لَكُمُ اللَّيْلَ وَالنَّهَارَ  
وَأَتَاكُمْ مِنْ كُلِّ مَا سَأَلْتُمُوهُ وَإِنْ تَعُدُّوا نِعْمَةَ اللَّهِ لَا تُحْصُوهَا

**And He has made subservient to you the ship that it might sail on the sea by His Command, and He has made the rivers usable for you. / And He has made the sun and moon subjected to you in their orbits and has made subservient to you the night and day. / And He has given you of everything you asked Him for. If you were to enumerate the blessings of AL-LĀH, you could not count them. (Q14:32–34)**

We need to remember that the Power of AL-LĀH is much greater and more intricate than mere brute force or total control. We rightly speak of the power of love, of beauty, and of truth. Power, in other words, is just another way of speaking of the Light of GOD in ways that we might not normally associate with light, such as volition, competence, strength, intellectual coherence, artistic passion, and emotional ties.

Understood in this light, human will does not negate GOD's Omnipotence, nor does His Will preclude the individual's power of choice. 'Free will' is actually a misnomer, for no one but GOD can be said to have a will that is unconstrained by its environment, conditioning, and learned behaviours and desires. But insofar as we observe and feel ourselves guiding the process of decision-making in our conscious selves, our feeling of freedom to choose is one of the clearest examples of how GOD's Will works

through us and our faculties. We can intimately experience the Power of GOD as it flows through all the factors that lead to our decision, including our sense of independence, and issues in an act that is more ‘ours’ than practically anything else we own in this world. This unity of ownership is what athletes and artists call ‘being in the zone’ or the ‘flow state’ – a self-transcendence that feels like a foretaste of Divinity.

This meshing of human will and Divine Will can be likened to the freedom of a fish to swim how and where it wants. What it wants is largely determined by its being a fish and having learned the limits imposed on it by its nature and the environment in which it acquired that nature. To that extent, it is not free. But the water enveloping it does not just physically confine it to a particular space; rather the water supports it, facilitates its movement, and responds to that movement. Going further, the water is what makes all this possible, and yet remains virtually invisible and unnoticed. Minus the water, there is no fish and no freedom to swim. So it is with human freedom – the more we feel we have it, the more dependent we are on the One Who freely sustains that beautiful illusion. (See Chapter 14 for a deeper look at this “illusion.”)

## SINGULAR CERTAINTY

Just as GOD cannot be understood in His Totality by one particular subset of attributes, neither can Truth be truly grasped if it is severed from Power, Life, and Love.

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّ اللَّهَ هُوَ الْحَقُّ وَأَنَّهُ يُحْيِي الْمَوْتَىٰ وَأَنَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ

**That is because AL-LĀH indeed is Truth, and truly He gives life to what is dead, and truly He has power over everything. (Q22:6)**

Through a particularly narrow definition of truth now prevalent in Western culture, many have come to believe that GOD and Truth are unrelated or even antithetical. What do we mean, then, by saying that we see the Light of GOD in Truth?

Every intellectual system relies for its veracity and acceptance on some fundamental proposition that is deemed to be self-evident, and hence unquestionable. A statement such as *Cogito, ergo sum* is one such attempt to verbalize the very bedrock of thought. Physicalist scientists regard the hard clarity of mathematics (e.g.,  $2 + 2 = 4$ ) or the physical sciences (e.g., the molecular formula for water, the length of a metre stick, or  $E = mc^2$ )

as the benchmark of reliability. Never mind that the human mind is so fashioned that whatever one person says, no matter how ‘clear’ or ‘obvious,’ can easily be doubted by another, or at least relegated to the trivially true. The impulse to work up from the obvious is itself noteworthy; it shows us that sight (or some other sense), as suggested by the term ‘self-evident,’ and not thought, is the ultimate ground of truth. The superstructure founded on that experience should be so carefully constructed that its architect can always say, ‘Surely, if you have seen the truth of this *a*, then *b*, *c*, *d*, and *e* above it are likewise undeniable.’ The greatest truth is one that best approximates an immediate, overwhelming experience, like an inspiration from heaven, and has the longest range, like the light of a supernova piercing immeasurable distances by sheer force.

فَإِنَّمَا هِيَ زَجْرَةٌ وَاحِدَةٌ فَإِذَا هُمْ يَنْظُرُونَ

**Then it is truly but a single shout, and suddenly they see. (Q37:19)**

Truth, then, is truest when it is most like Power, Life, and Love, all of which are ‘known’ intuitively or immediately, without the aid of words. All four of these absolutes resemble Light in their being apprehended at once and directly, like a flash of insight.

وَمَا أَمْرُنَا إِلَّا وَاحِدَةٌ كَلَمْحٍ بِالْبَصَرِ

**Our Command is single, like a glance of sight. (Q54:50)**

The particular gift of Truth is in leading the mind from that first illumination into the darker regions where laws, theories, scientific methods, and moral reasoning must take the place of instantaneous vision. It is in these labyrinths of the intellect that the original Light of GOD can be gradually lost. Partial, diminished, and reflected lights of any sort are welcome, and so desperately needed that in time they can convince us that GOD Himself is a matter of doubt. A candle in a dungeon can be both a genuine friend and a poor witness to the reality of sunlight.

When people insist on the truth today, they often mean nothing more than facts of mere candle power that illuminate virtually nothing, like knowing the hair colour of a celebrity. GOD as Truth is not just the sum of all these tidbits of information, but the Absolute Source of transformative meaning, changing not only minds but hearts as well. The truths of modern science are but pale reflections of that Divine Brilliance. AL-LĀH has to wrap His truths in ‘signs,’ namely the impressively diverse and

abundant phenomena of this world, if we are to make sense of them in any meaningful way at all, rather than being simply blown away or blinded by their original intensity. And one such truth is the peace that comes to us as we absorb these diffractions of The One Truth.

## INTRUSIONS OF ETERNITY

As we ponder here the numerous ways by which the Absolute can express Himself to us in terms necessarily relative, we gradually tilt towards a faulty understanding of a Being Who lives, loves, acts, and knows in ways that we can almost call familiar. We need to remind ourselves, over and over again, that however much the Infinite condescends to use the terms of our finite understanding, He is ultimately incomprehensible to us, and closer to the wordless glowing in our hearts than the prolix products of our heads. One of the names of AL-LĀH that best conveys this ineffable sense of perfection in silence is Peace or Serenity.

عَنْ عَائِشَةَ رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهَا أَنَّ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ كَانَ إِذَا سَلَّمَ قَالَ اللَّهُمَّ أَنْتَ السَّلَامُ وَمِنْكَ السَّلَامُ تَبَارَكْتَ يَا ذَا الْجَلَالِ وَالْإِكْرَامِ

*From ‘Ā’ishah (may AL-LĀH be pleased with her) [who said] that the Messenger of AL-LĀH (may God bless him and give him peace) would say, when [completing his worship by] pronouncing peace, “O GOD, You are Serenity; from You Serenity exists. How blessed are You, the Owner of Sublimity and Honour!”*

*(Sunanun-Nasā’ī, Ḥadīth 1338)*

Although Paradise is described in terms that reflect higher planes of life, love, power, and knowledge, it is most often designated as the ‘Place of Peace’ – *Dārus-salām* (Jerusalem being its earth-bound cognate). This could be because, amid all the various manifestations of Divinity in this world, an enlightened tranquillity is the form that most convincingly signals the presence of GOD in both the Everafter and this world. All the various strands of life, love, power, and truth hinted at earlier come together in the demeanour and virtues of those rare persons who radiate the Reality of Immortal Being. In the presence of these select spirits, we cannot help but feel reverence and awe, as if we were on the verge of encountering GOD Himself.

We wonder how GOD can be unchanging and yet live, unmoved and yet act, beyond all need and yet love, or omniscient and yet responsive to every detail of our lives. The Peace ‘that passeth understanding’ shows us – occasionally in our own hearts, through dreams or intense spiritual epiphanies – how that might be. When we awake or return to ordinary consciousness, we half-remember how it appeared then, inexplicable but utterly convincing. We realize how our experience of time dilutes or interferes with this altered consciousness, which is why so many passages of the Qur’ān link higher forms of spiritual awakening, including death and resurrection, to the abbreviation or erasure of time:

لَيْلَةُ الْقَدْرِ خَيْرٌ مِنْ أَلْفِ شَهْرٍ  
تَنْزَلُ الْمَلَائِكَةُ وَالرُّوحُ فِيهَا بِإِذْنِ رَبِّهِمْ مِنْ كُلِّ أَمْرٍ  
سَلَامٌ هِيَ حَتَّى مَطْلَعِ الْفَجْرِ

**The night of the Decree is better than a thousand months. / The angels and the Spirit are descending in it by permission of their Lord with each command. / Peace! Until the break of dawn. (Q97:3-5)**

These moments of bliss in our lives are probably the nearest we will ever come to meeting the Transcendent before our ultimate reunion with AL-LĀH. Not all who taste such ecstasy connect it to a monotheistic faith; many prefer less metaphysical terms such as *nirvana* or *satori*, or simply remain aware of how they feel at the time without delving into its provenance or greater meaning. Even Peace can seem overemphasized as a mode of Divine Presence when we are attuned to other aspects that we find more meaningful or of greater concern.

My purpose in this introductory digression is not to establish a hierarchy of values or to declare one or another version more enlivening, powerful, comforting, or true. As limited beings, we will never have an adequate grasp of the Omnipresent One. Freedom from all of our conceptions and descriptions is yet another way of connoting GOD.

But for many who read this, connoting will never be enough. He must be denoted (and thus demoted). The big question in their minds, the focus of all their doubts, is: What is God? Does He exist? Or is He merely a figment of our overactive, anthropomorphic imagination?



## 4.

# GOD, BEING, AND THE GREAT BEYOND



How do we define God? A cosmic spirit? A universal force? An organizing principle? An emergent intelligence? Or a relic of ancient fears, hopes, and superstitions – a mental prosthesis, a mere cover for potholes, soon to be paved over, on the royal road to a modern paradise of science, democracy, and capitalism?

Traditional theology lays out answers in terms of being and non-being, or essence and existence, and attempts to prove its conclusions by means of logic, rational evidence, and linguistic analysis. And so we have ongoing debates not only between physicalists and deists but also never-ending (eternal?) arguments among the proponents of various theories of what God is.<sup>E</sup>

### E

I mentioned, on page 1, the potential for agreement on denoting absolutes such as justice even when we differ on what they connote. GOD, however, cannot be denoted, but only pointed towards, or indicated, which is why disputes about what GOD connotes— father figure or tyrant, cosmic force or inner peace, et cetera – are so virulent. There are at least three reasons why denoting or defining GOD is impossible:

1. The very form of the question ‘What is GOD?’ posits a false equivalence, namely GOD = x. Arguments about GOD’s existence assume a similar category error, namely that GOD belongs to a (necessarily greater) group of existents.

وَلَمْ يَكُنْ لَهُ كُفُوًا أَحَدٌ

**And nothing is comparable to Him. (Q112:4)**

E (continued)

2. Everything can be defined. But GOD is not a thing. He is by definition Undefinable, Unattainable by any of our faculties.

لَا تُدْرِكُهُ الْأَبْصَارُ وَهُوَ يُدْرِكُ الْأَبْصَارَ

**Vision comprehends Him not, but He encompasses [all] vision. (Q6:103)**

3. It is in the nature of persons to be resistant to 'What is'-type questions. GOD, as the Personal-Suprapersonal Absolute, is absolutely resistant to such queries.

لَا يُسْأَلُ عَمَّا يَفْعَلُ وَهُمْ يُسْأَلُونَ

**He is not queried over what He does, but they are questioned. (Q21:23)**

There is an elemental error, however, in all these discussions, however fascinating and relevant they appear to be. When we experience ourselves, albeit dimly and confusedly, we do not think, 'Here is a human being that happens to be me.' Rather we immediately assert, 'Here am I.'

Our very sense of being flows from a bottomless belief that our 'who' precedes our 'what.' Materialism, of course, propounds the opposite, that our 'what' is original or primary while our 'who' is derivative or secondary. The demonic fruits of that philosophy, when unleavened by spiritual, personal ideals such as justice and compassion, are evident all around us nowadays in a corporatocracy that smugly sacrifices the well-being of the many for the material gain of a few lifeless entities, the corporations (and the shareholders who submit their humanity to the inhuman demands of the balance sheet).

Let us consider, then, how far we can go with putting 'Who' first.

عَنْ عَائِشَةَ رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهَا قَالَتْ إِنِّي لِأَعْلَمُ كَيْفَ كَانَ النَّبِيُّ صَلَّى  
اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ يُلَبِّي لَبَّيْكَ اللَّهُمَّ لَبَّيْكَ لَبَّيْكَ لَا شَرِيكَ لَكَ لَبَّيْكَ إِنَّ  
الْحَمْدَ وَالنِّعْمَةَ لَكَ

*From 'Ā'ishah (may GOD be pleased with her), who said, "Verily I know how the Prophet (may GOD bless him and give him peace) used to say the pilgrimage prayer: 'Here am I, O GOD; here am I. Here am I; You have no partner; here am I. Truly praise and blessings are for You.'"*

(*Ṣaḥīḥul-Bukhārī, Book 25, Ḥadīth 36*)

The immediacy of ‘I’ and ‘You,’ beyond all questions of ‘what,’ is a powerful affirmation of the primacy of heartfulness over mindfulness in our lives. Could it be the character of the cosmos too? <sup>F</sup>

Although there are a few places in the Qur’ān where GOD is explicitly

**F**

The tendency of modern scientism to regard hard material realities – the world’s ‘what’ – as basic, and its indefinite moral or spiritual dimensions – where we look for ‘who’ in the world – as illusory or questionable, is rather like a person who sees a statue in the park as only a rather oddly shaped formation of granite, say, and various metals. He sees no meaningful distinction between the pedestal and the figure standing on it, and thinks that because the base supports the figure the latter owes its existence to the former. He would consider the evidence that the base was installed first as proof that his view of the matter is the correct one. In vain do we point out to him the purpose of the whole construction, that the sculpture represents a historical person or event, or that it has some significance greater than the matter from which it was made. All he sees is the material, and considers the pedestal and the figure on it to be but one thing, differentiated only by shape and composition.

referred to as something rather than someone (e.g., **Q91:7–8**), the language used to present AL-LĀH is almost always personal, as in **Q20:14**:

إِنِّي أَنَا اللَّهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا أَنَا فَاعْبُدْنِي وَأَقِمِ الصَّلَاةَ لِذِكْرِي

**Verily I am AL-LĀH; there is no god but I, so serve Me and establish worship to remember Me.**

This anthropomorphic colouring is elaborated even further by references – metaphorical, of course – to His Hands, His Fingers, His Eyes, His Throne, His Footstool, His being seated, His descending, His running, His watching, His listening, His Anger, His Sorrow, His Laughter, His Jealousy, His Forgiveness, His Mercy, and, obviously, the use of pronouns such as ‘He,’ ‘Him,’ ‘His,’ ‘We,’ ‘Us,’ ‘Our,’ ‘I,’ ‘Me,’ and ‘My.’

People who take all this literally often end up conceiving of God as simply a person on a larger scale, a ‘father-in-the-sky’ figure. Because of this, a rational adherent to the concept of a cosmic Intelligence may favour a depersonalized God for fear of what he/she sees many believers doing, namely projecting their egos and biases onto an infinitely powerful version

of themselves. A personal God is seen as an overblown, ultra-privileged mental idol developed as a tool to dominate and intimidate others. Evidence of that tendency is rife in the monotheistic religions, as they seem to provide a megaphone by which ‘I say’ is converted into an overbearing ‘God says.’

Countering this argument, on the other hand, is ample evidence that a culture does not appear to become any gentler, humbler, or less violent when it substitutes for a single deity some form of animist traditions (twentieth-century Shinto Japan), polytheism (the Aztec Empire), nationalism (Nazi Germany), atheism (the Khmer Rouge), materialism (twentieth-century Maoist China) or neoliberalism (twenty-first-century U.S.A.). (These ‘isms’ are not mutually exclusive.) Any type of faith, no matter how it is formulated, tends to be misused when its affirmations are distorted by poor judgement and bad character. Just as a rise in the crude materialism that sees the world as an amoral field for boundless exploitation and oppression would not justify our banning the teaching of science in schools, so also does the occasional coincidence of monotheistic faith and militarism prove nothing except that man is endlessly inventive in compartmentalizing his inner life and rationalizing whatever he does.

Proponents of the accusation that monotheism leads to violence and egotism obviously have no time to study or absorb what the faithful have known for millennia, namely that GOD is the supreme antidote to everything that the human race has agreed to be immoral or selfish.

عَنْ أَبِي ذَرٍّ قَالَ قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ فِيمَا يَرْوِي عَنْ رَبِّهِ تَبَارَكَ وَتَعَالَى إِنِّي حَرَّمْتُ عَلَى نَفْسِي الظُّلْمَ وَعَلَى عِبَادِي فَلَا تَظَالُمُوا

*From Abī Dharr, who said that the Messenger of AL-LĀH (may GOD bless him and give him peace) said, in what he related from his Lord, the Blessed, the Lofty, “Truly I have forbidden oppression for Myself and for My servants, so do not oppress one another.”*

*(Ṣaḥīḥu Muslim, Book 45, Ḥadīth 73)*

A naïve faith in God as an All-Knowing, All-Powerful, and Omnipresent Person is not the most refined faith one could wish for, as I will soon explain, but it is far from being the worst. It has the potential merit (again, depending on the character of the believer) of submitting one’s ego to wholesome disciplines and lofty absolutes, of reminding oneself of all that humbles and tames one’s worst passions and desires, and demanding that a higher Justice and a deeper Compassion be served ahead of oneself. Its

ethical potential far outweighs its intellectual flaws.

Critics who can see the chilling defects of a rational, impersonal God are entitled to point out the shortcomings of an anthropomorphic, personal God. If God is no more than a person, then we cannot help but attribute to Him all the failings that attach themselves to human personality, including gendered pronouns, as in English and Arabic. However much we may remind ourselves that His descriptions of Himself in the Qur'ān are not to be taken literally, such tropes inevitably bend the mind of the reader towards gross misinterpretations of the Divine – occupying space, possessing extension, subjected to time, taking a point of view and changing it, reacting to circumstances, being passionate, having objectives or ends, distinguishing and thus separating Himself from creation, and therefore existing at a distance from human affairs. All these characteristics are natural corollaries to how we normally think of persons, since our experience of persons is almost entirely limited to ourselves and other human beings.<sup>G</sup>

To transcend these concepts is to tread the *via negativa*, crossing into the realm of apophatic mysticism in which nothing can be said about GOD

#### G

Just as we cannot say what GOD is, we are unqualified to say who GOD is. We will never be able to comprehend the identity of GOD in any form, be it personal or impersonal.

Although we cannot say who GOD is in Himself, the Qur'ān clearly envisages our dealing with Him as He is for us. In other words, speak to Him as you would to a person, and cultivate a relationship with Him as you would with a person. Make Him the First Person in your life.

قَالَ يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ مَا الْإِحْسَانُ قَالَ الْإِحْسَانُ أَنْ تَعْبُدَ اللَّهَ كَأَنَّكَ تَرَاهُ  
فَإِنْ لَمْ تَكُنْ تَرَاهُ فَإِنَّهُ يَرَاكَ

***“O Messenger of AL-LĀH, what is excellence?” He replied, “Excellence is that you worship GOD as if you see Him, and if you cannot see Him, truly He sees you.”***

***(Ṣaḥīḥul-Bukhārī, Book 65, Ḥadīth 4777)***

For all human intents and purposes, He is a person ... but never forget that this concession to our limitations does not in any way limit GOD to being nothing more than a person, or only what we understand persons to be. This is why I use the term ‘Personal-Suprapersonal Absolute.’ No expression of mine, however, will ever do justice to AL-LĀH.

except what He is not. If personality is the highest form of being that we can imagine, and yet realize that it, too, is not high enough, we are bound to see all positive descriptions of Divinity as tainted by their worldly associations, and therefore seek to dissociate Him from all that would tie down His Absoluteness ('absolute' being a derivative of the Latin *absolvo*, to loosen or set free). We do not say that He is perfect (from the Latin *perficere*, to finish), but rather that He is devoid of imperfection, nor that He is powerful, but that He is Beyond all conceptions of power. By cleansing our minds of all substantive impressions of Him, we do not reach for something conceptually higher, but rather school ourselves to mentally let go of GOD, that we might follow Him more devoutly with our hearts.

When we say *subhānaL-LĀH*, sometimes translated as "Glory be to GOD!" but more accurately as "Transcendently Free is GOD (of whatever has been said or thought of Him)," we are expressing apophatic theology in Islamic terms. But this transcendence is commonly and mistakenly thought to mean that GOD is somehow removed or separated from our daily reality or mundane affairs. GOD is Transcendently Free of this misconception as well. We must acknowledge His Freedom from all limits, even the supposed boundaries between the heavenly and the worldly. His Transcendence does not exclude His Immanence,<sup>H</sup> but rather embraces it. As *Aẓ-Zāhir* and *Al-Bāṭin*, two of His Names confirmed in the Qur'ān

#### H

Some commentators (e.g., Muhammad Asad in his *The Message of the Qur'ān* at **Q21:18**)\*, consider mention of GOD's immanence to be false and blasphemous. They think it to be an expression which equates GOD with His creation or alleges some kind of co-existence with His creatures.

That is clearly not my meaning or intent. GOD can no more be found 'inside' anything than He is found 'outside.' The very notion of His dependence on anything, or any sort of location, boundary, or container for GOD, intellectual or otherwise, is absurd, and reeks of the materialism that dominates modern discourse. Both transcendence and immanence can only be suggestively imprecise indicators of how we feel GOD to be related to us – as One Who is utterly Beyond what we know or imagine, and yet One Who, through our prayers and innermost moments, at the very core of our being, is closer to us than our **jugular vein (Q50:16)**. If that verse is not an emphatic assertion of immanence, I do not know what is.

\*Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, p. 673–674.

(Q57:3), He is both Manifest in all things and Hidden in all things – hiding in plain sight, as it were. We ‘see’ Him constantly – something like a fish in direct contact with water – and so never recognize Him.

How can this be possible – simultaneously revealed and concealed, both present and not apparent? It sounds like mere mystical sophistry and fanciful theorizing, but we all experience how this works in our daily lives. Consider the mind. On the one hand, a few moments of observation are enough to tell me whether you are conscious or not, (i.e., that your mind is present). On the other hand, I cannot directly see, hear, taste, smell, or feel your mind; it hides behind the signs by which it reveals itself. All I can do is infer its presence, and yet that inference is as close to certainty as I can be about someone else. And so your mind is manifest to me and yet hidden from me at the same time.

From your own perspective, the mind ‘feels’ as if it lies within you, right behind your eyes. You can ‘see’ or ‘hear’ some of what you are thinking on what seems to be an inner screen or soundtrack, and you can consciously peruse its contents by acts of memory or attention. All this is done in secret, so you can dissimulate, alter, or lie about these states of awareness when dealing with others. In one sense, therefore, your mind is a private, inner reality. On the other hand, your mind is much more fluent in and comfortable with the external world than with its own insides. It is an outdoor entity, in the sense that its images, vocabulary, and interests are all drawn from and attuned to the world of physical bodies, motion, and space. Its very language is derived from a public consensus on what is ‘out there.’ Your mind has found ways to achieve a precision abroad, through the techniques of modern science, that it will never reach as it stumbles around in the dark room containing that dim and solitary screen of your thoughts and memories. And so you could say that your mind has both an internal – *bāṭin* – habitat and an external – *ẓāhir* – propensity. Is it an agent of the external world growing within you, or a true proxy for yourself wandering into an alien environment? Or both? Or neither? Who can say?

In learning to control the physical world, humanity has discovered amazing tools – ones that we can only wave about like stubby pitchforks when we come to the deep, unlit chasms of ignorance within ourselves. Consider this: for all our scientific knowledge, including the most recent revelations about the human brain, we are little better at comprehending and controlling our own consciousness than we were ten thousand years ago. We are so accustomed to skirting this impasse that we no longer appreciate the scope and grandeur of its profundity. We have lived so long on the edge of an abyss that its proximity usually leaves us unmoved.

As overwhelming as the vastness of interstellar space, and as beautiful as a coral reef or a choral symphony, our ineffable, internal realms of meaning and insight can move us to awe, tears, or acts of noble sacrifice and constant devotion. None of these forces can be summoned by human will alone, as they point to an undefinable potential inside us that is greater than what we can know and control.<sup>1</sup> How can we make sense of this tremendous unseen Reality that can never be reduced to figures or clear concepts? What symbols do we use to convey this presence of the Infinite in our daily lives?

Why do we search for meaning? What is the source of our values, and of our need for them? I contend that GOD is present in every quest for meaning and every act of love, whether we acknowledge His Presence or not. Without such instances of Immanence, our lives would be meaningless and worthless.



## 5.

# THE HEART OF CREATION



Because so many thinkers nowadays are uncomfortable with the idea of God, references to ‘Universal Mind,’ ‘Cosmic Intelligence,’ or something similarly aloof and impersonal have long been gaining traction in philosophical circles. The attractiveness of such language is the distance it puts between the recent and exciting possibilities suggested by super-computers and the wonders of the human mind, on the one hand, and the old anthropomorphic deities that bear the taint of their primitive passions, judgemental attitudes, and biases associated with being ‘personal,’ on the other hand. We tend to think of perfection in terms that are cleanly abstract and impeccably scientific. The God of scripture and religion, the God that people pray to and adore, has, it seems, too much baggage from the past to deserve modern intellectual respect.

I will refrain from elaborating here on how the impersonal, conceptual deity of the intelligentsia is even more subservient to their particular social and psychological foibles than the traditional personal God of the common people is to their needs. That may deserve a chapter of its own. My main concern at this point is to indicate how poorly a ‘Universal Mind’ accounts for the world as we find and enjoy it. Creation of any sort is a work of the heart, not only the mind, and is nonsensical from a purely logical standpoint. To explain our living, changing world, we require something more than the strictures of intellectual rigour. We need Divine Mercy.

From a stringently rational point of view, which would be that of the God of logical consistency, this finite, faulty, and filthy world of ours is literally unforgivable. It contains too many blemishes and pointless addenda to the Supreme Unicity of a Single-Minded Deity. Absolute Unity seems to preclude any chance of multiplicity, let alone the chaotic confusion of the creatures we see around us. Dwelling Alone (All One) in His Absolute, Infinitely Spaceless and Timeless Perfection, GOD is sufficient unto Himself, and cannot be said to ‘need’ anything.

فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ غَنِيٌّ عَنِ الْعَالَمِينَ

**Truly GOD is Free from need for any of the worlds. (Q3:97)**

But this world of ours does express His Perfection when we take perfection to be the possession of all ideal attributes, including those that can only be expressed in the presence of imperfection. Confronting the less real, the greater Reality is neither mute nor indifferent.

وَمَا خَلَقْنَا السَّمَاءَ وَالْأَرْضَ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا لَاعِبِينَ  
لَوْ أَرَدْنَا أَنْ نَتَّخِذَ لَهُمْ لَا تَتَّخِذْنَاهُ مِنْ لَدُنَّا إِنْ كُنَّا فَاعِلِينَ  
بَلْ نَقْذِفُ بِالْحَقِّ عَلَى الْبَاطِلِ فَيَدْمَغُهُ فَإِذَا هُوَ زَاهِقٌ وَلَكُمُ الْوَيْلُ مِمَّا  
تَصِفُونَ

**And We did not create the heaven and the earth and what there is between them for the fun of it. / If We had wanted entertainment, We could have obtained it from Ourselves if We were so inclined. / No, instead We cast the true against the false, destroying it, and so it disappears. And woe to you for what you are imagining! (Q21:16–18)**

Why does GOD permit **the false** to be mentioned in the first place? Because, without this grace period, this short dark gap in the brilliance of Eternity, we would have never grown up out of the soil of mere existence, and the spirit from AL-LĀH we possess like glass possesses sunlight would have never shone through us. Divinity appears all the greater for its manifestation in lesser forms of being.

The Divine Forgiveness is what gives time and space for all this to be. As **The Gracious, The Compassionate**, AL-LĀH both creates room for this dazzling demonstration to occur and kindly pardons it in advance, allowing it to flourish in relative peace and freedom. If we were to say only that this world was conceived in sin, no power could justify it. Rather we believe that our universe was engendered, prior to sin, in clemency and forbearance as a moral order, permeated from its inception with the creative power of mercy. This is why the first description of AL-LĀH in the Qur'ān is associated with life-giving Love rather than rigorous Truth. And this is why, when in the second verse we read **Praise be to GOD, the Master of the worlds (Q1:2)**, this moral order is subsequently confirmed with the very same attributes,

الرَّحْمَنُ الرَّحِيمُ

**The Gracious, The Compassionate, (Q1:3)**

as if to stress that even after all the dirt, deceit, and destruction in **the worlds**, nothing has really changed. AL-LĀH continues to approach His creatures with His original, all-encompassing Mercy and respond to their individual pleas for more time and more compassion, right up until the moment our performance ends.

عَنْ أَبِي هُرَيْرَةَ أَنَّ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ قَالَ قَالَ اللَّهُ عَزَّ  
وَجَلَّ يُؤْذِنِي ابْنُ آدَمَ يَسُبُّ الدَّهْرَ وَأَنَا الدَّهْرُ أَقْلِبُ اللَّيْلَ وَالنَّهَارَ

*From Abī Hurairah, [who reported] that the Messenger of AL-LĀH (may GOD bless him and give him peace) said, “AL-LĀH the Mighty and Glorious said, ‘The son of Ādam wrongs Me in reviling time, for I am Time; I alternate the night and day.’”*

*(Ṣaḥīḥu Muslim, Book 40, Ḥadīth 2)*

Once again, I remind readers that expressions such as *I am Time* are not to be taken literally. Here we have the paradoxical presence of the Infinite in the finite, of the Divine Life in our daily lives, and so must learn to accept the ambiguity, allusiveness, and waywardness that only *koan*-like poetic language can provide. Many of us have an inkling of how such language works, based on our common sense of Love being the one force that breaks the bounds of common sense.

To understand our world, therefore, we are in more need of a Universal Heart than a Cosmic Intelligence.<sup>†</sup> Not only does it provide the motive

## J

If we conceive of God as a symbol of rationality (rationality as we define it) or a principle rather than a Person, we are more likely to think of God as the product of the human brain, read (or write) books with titles like ‘The History of God’ or ‘The Evolution of God,’ and dissociate ourselves from the common people’s imaginal realm of worship and prayer. We will also tend to care more about how ‘real people’ feel or think about us than how God regards us. Belief in an impersonal God may satisfy our intellects, but it leaves our hearts continuously searching for comfort in other fields.

The Qur’ān frequently emphasizes the emotional impact of its verses precisely because our real lives are heartfelt lives. A God that does not move us as a person would, Face to face, Heart to heart, is little more than a statue in the park of academia – not what we could call our spiritual home, but an unmoving, unwitting perch where our souls can drop their excrement.

force behind creation, which mere intelligence lacks, but it also reminds us of the mysterious spiritual powers that operate both in our personal domain – our subconscious – and in the universe as a whole. We are humbler, richer beings than the culmination of a mechanical, random, and heartless process of gradual emergence, as Darwinians tend to suggest in a sly, unspoken concession to our need to see ourselves at the top of the evolutionary pile. And we are not the only, nor even the first, persons in the cosmos, but rather the natural products of a Natural, Forceful, and Caring Person.

Since AL-LĀH is the source of this heart-felt Reality, He must have more ‘heart’ – infinitely more – than anything else, even human beings. This is yet another way in which it makes sense to say that we know Him better than we know ourselves. In other words, what we immediately sense with introspection is not just our presence, but primarily His Presence, which is why it is so unshakably convincing. We get the feeling that ‘this,’ whatever it is, is somehow permanent, that it could not possibly be extinguished forever. Our distinctive identity, the sum of our self-talk, experiences, and how we internalize others’ reactions to us, is something we drape over that initial sense of presence. We go through this Presence of His to get to that identity of ours.

The mind demands unity, but will not stop making distinctions, and thus frustrates its own designs. The heart permits and encourages diversity, and continues seeing an underlying unity despite the differences. Therefore, the Qur’ān is constantly talking about couples, and how everything GOD creates is engendered in pairs. We may understand from that not only the obvious contrast of male and female, but all the complementary opposites, such as heaven and earth and day and night (and others inconceivable until recently, such as matter and antimatter), that inhabit the Qur’ānic universe and contribute to the fascinating, dynamic, and balanced tension that creativity demands.

وَمِنْ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ خَلَقْنَا زَوْجَيْنِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَذَكَّرُونَ

**From everything We have created pairs that you might be engaged in thought. (Q51:49)**

عَنْ ابْنِ عُمَرَ عَنِ النَّبِيِّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ قَالَ صَلَاةُ اللَّيْلِ وَالنَّهَارِ مَثْنَى مَثْنَى

*From Ibni ‘Umar, from the Prophet, (may GOD bless him and give him peace) who said, “Ritual worship by night and day is [performed] two by two.”*

*(Sunanu Abī Dāwūd, Book 5, Ḥadīth 46)*

The first verse of the Qur'ān contains a pair of Names – **The Gracious, The Compassionate** – that are repeatedly appended to **AL-LĀH** throughout the Qur'ān, and this pair is further paired by repetition in the third verse of 'The Opening.' The entire *Sūrah* (one of 114 divisions of the Qur'ān) is structured around sets of pairs and opposites, particularly the main division mentioned in this tradition:

فَإِنِّي سَمِعْتُ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ يَقُولُ يَقُولُ اللَّهُ عَزَّ  
وَجَلَّ قَسَمْتُ الصَّلَاةَ بَيْنِي وَبَيْنَ عَبْدِي نِصْفَيْنِ فَنِصْفُهَا لِي وَنِصْفُهَا  
لِعَبْدِي وَلِعَبْدِي مَا سَأَلَ

*[From Abī Hurairah, who said,] "I heard the Messenger of AL-LĀH (may GOD bless him and give him peace) say, 'AL-LĀH the Mighty and Glorious says, "I have divided worship [recitation of 'The Opening'] between Myself and My slave into two halves. Half is for Me, and half is for My slave. And for My slave is that which he requests."'"*

*(Sunanun-Nasā'ī, Book 11, Ḥadīth 34)*

Everything besides GOD is beset by duality, finitude, and ambivalence. The only true absolute is the Absolute Himself, and He Alone is truly One. Our universe is made with truth, but shadowed by falsehood. Neither all right nor all wrong, neither totally existent nor completely non-existent, it subsists by GOD's concession of a grace period – for **an appointed term**.

مَا خَلَقَ اللَّهُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا إِلَّا بِالْحَقِّ وَأَجَلٍ مُّسَمًّى  
**AL-LĀH did not create the heavens and the earth and that which is between them other than with truth and an appointed term. (Q30:8)**

Between the bipolar **heavens and the earth** there appears a middle ground, **that which is between them**, which is neither entirely one nor the other. This zone of ambiguity is where we literally find ourselves. Not quite angelic, not utterly satanic, this human realm of ours maintains every duality, resolves every contradiction, and embraces every opposite. It is in this in-between domain, this *barzakh*, that faith is at its most creative, and also where it is most imperative. Here differences of origin and disparities of fact are brought together in new forms of unity. This place, our home 'where the heart is,' happens to be where love is most essential. And here, at the heart of creation, embedded in finite time and limited space, is where AL-LĀH proclaims Himself to be **The Gracious, The Compassionate**.

إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَنْظُرُ إِلَى أَجْسَادِكُمْ وَلَا إِلَى صُورِكُمْ وَلَكِنْ يَنْظُرُ إِلَى قُلُوبِكُمْ

*“Verily AL-LĀH does not attend to your physiques or your appearances, but pays attention to your hearts.”*

*(Ṣaḥīḥu Muslim, Book 45, Ḥadīth 41)*

Caught between the uplifting clarity of heaven and the firm solidity of earth, and drawn to both, hearts are naturally unstable and unpredictable.

قَالَ قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ مَثَلُ الْقَلْبِ مَثَلُ الرِّيشَةِ تُقَلَّبُهَا الرِّيَّاحُ بِفَلَاةٍ

*The Messenger of AL-LĀH (may GOD bless him and give him peace) said, “The heart is like the feather that the desert winds blow about.”*

*(Sunanub-ni Mājah, Book 1, Ḥadīth 93)*

Even so, Truth is not excluded from this domain, one that modern scientists might refer to as chaotic. Truth is eternal, and yet is reconciled somehow with a predetermined time limit, **an appointed term**. Time offends against the timeless Truth of The Divine, and yet is pardoned and given space, without which this cosmos could not be born (or borne). The enheartened character of the universe is a vital condition of its being, its inner nature and constitution, and not just an afterthought or an appendix to the supposedly essential facts of physical science. Rather the facts are dependent on a continuous act of Love, holding back the collapse of this beautiful and amazing absurdity that we have learned to consider normal. Love makes time and space for the work of Truth.

Why, then, do so many today consider the idea of God to be a cruel joke, and the universe to be not only heartless but meaningless? They ask, ‘How can a Loving, Omnipotent Creator permit the crimes and suffering that make us doubt that He even exists? How can we explain the reality of evil?’

## 6.

# IDENTIFYING EVIL



The question of evil is a vexing one for a believer, whereas it only serves to energize today's atheist debaters. We might even say that were it not for evil, atheists would not exist.

The atheists' argument has been around for ages (and so has the answer to it, of course). Here are the steps in their reasoning:

1. Evil exists. We all can attest to the occurrence of horrible crimes and appalling disasters.
2. A compassionate God would want to prevent these from occurring, just as we humans do.
3. An omniscient and omnipotent God would be able to prevent these from occurring, whereas mankind generally lacks that ability.
4. An omniscient, omnipotent, and compassionate God is the only valid option for monotheistic believers; an ignorant, impotent, or uncaring God is not really worthy of worship at all, and does not deserve the name of God.
5. Therefore the existence of God and the existence of evil are mutually contradictory; one cannot have both in the same world. Given the existence of evil, God has to go.
6. Therefore God does not exist.
7. To make matters worse, a Creator God would be held responsible for the evil He created, contradicting the popular belief that God is good.

Let us start with the idea of a world in which nothing 'bad' happens. There would be no death, period, since any form of death would at the very least involve some psychological trauma. So that immediately rules out all carnivorous life. We should eliminate all pathogens in the environment while we are at it, which pretty well puts an end to evolution as we know it. Since evolutionary change, disease, and death are off the table, we would have to be transformed into innocuous entities who gradually,

peacefully, populate every corner of the universe if they reproduce (but why would they want to?) and float around in a bland, lukewarm atmosphere, free of sharp objects or any encounter with unpleasant physical facts such as burning, drowning, or falling down stairs. Maybe, just to be safe, we should abolish gravity and a few other laws of physics as well.

If God and evil are truly incompatible, this is the world the atheist debaters would allow Him to make for us – a sort of heaven for dummies. If their version of a compassionate, omnipotent God is going to actually do anything, He will have to make do with a cream-coloured, bubble bath of a cosmos for coddled, complacent jellyfish who have never shed a tear or a drop of sweat. Compare that with heaven as a prize awarded to real people who have struggled through grief, fear, and defeat in a previous life and who both deserve and are grateful for something more than room-temperature materialism. As a compelling story, as eternal justice, which version makes sense? Which one feels right? (Or which one is less nauseating?)

So never mind the heavenly scenarios, an atheist will say. This world, the one we are in now, is simply bad – so bad that it will not admit God (yet we have to accept it.) For many people, however, hope in God is what makes all this badness tolerable. If we have to live in a physicalist dungeon, at least keep a window open so we can see the sky. A good atheist, however, will not listen to that nonsense. Slam the door, lock it, and swallow the key, of course, but also brick up the windows for the sake of consistency with the colour scheme of the walls around us.

This seems to be a nightmarish, self-harming reaction to the fact of ‘bad things happening to good people.’ The believer, the optimist, is able to shrug off the bad and say, ‘But there’s so much good out there, too.’ And not only that. As the case of the insipid jellyfish heaven illustrates, ‘bad’ and ‘good’ are inseparable. Remove one and the other starts to fade as well. If God is All Good, says the atheist, then why is there anything bad in this world? The answer: because good would be unrecognizable without it.

Atheists like to point out the terrible scale of the immense tragedies that befall mankind and animals. But if we accept the principle that good and bad are paired, by the very nature of how things like gravity, air pressure, and combustion work, we can’t really quibble about the scale of disasters. After all, where do you draw the line? It would be a celestial bureaucrat’s nightmare. Does Aunt Emma’s radiation therapy merit a pass (i.e., acceptable) because of a famine in ancient Nubia that killed thousands (i.e., unacceptable)? Do hundreds of fish squirming and gasping as they die on the deck of a trawler equal a broken leg on a ski slope? Who



decides what is a little or a lot? The answer: God decides, and so has made a universe that includes it all.

لَا يَسْأَمُ الْإِنْسَانُ مِنْ دُعَاءِ الْخَيْرِ وَإِنْ مَسَّهُ الشَّرُّ فَيَئُوسٌ قَنُوطٌ

**Man is never tired of asking for the good. But if misfortune touches him, then he is desperate, despondent. (Q41:49)**

If we are going to live in a universe that works by cause and effect, prevention and cure, foresight and experience, then setbacks, pain, failure, and death are necessarily thrown into the balance. Massive die-offs, disease, and other forms of suffering are just the dues we owe as paying members of the biosphere.

Another line of argument, closely linked to that of good and bad being natural twins, is that adversities are not only how we learn to enjoy life but also how we upgrade ourselves. Every virtue – courage, forbearance, forgiveness, gentleness, generosity, prudence, and even wisdom – is forged in the fire of hardship, pain, and loss, undergone either by us or by those close to us. Misfortune is the soil of spiritual growth, the dark background of bright new life. Not only is the good linked to the bad, it positively demands it as a precondition.

وَلَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا إِلَىٰ أُمَمٍ مِنْ قَبْلِكَ فَأَخَذْنَاهُمْ بِالْبَأْسَاءِ وَالضَّرَّاءِ لَعَلَّهُمْ  
يَتَضَرَّعُونَ

**Indeed We sent [Our messengers] to peoples who preceded you, and seized them with misfortunes and diseases that they might be humble. (Q6:42)**

وَبَلَوْنَاهُمْ بِالْحَسَنَاتِ وَالسَّيِّئَاتِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَرْجِعُونَ

**We tested them with good and bad so that they might return. (Q7:168)**

عَجَبًا لِأَمْرِ الْمُؤْمِنِ إِنَّ أَمْرَهُ كُلَّهُ خَيْرٌ وَلَيْسَ ذَاكَ لِأَحَدٍ إِلَّا لِلْمُؤْمِنِ  
إِنْ أَصَابَتْهُ سَرَّاءٌ شَكَرَ فَكَانَ خَيْرًا لَهُ وَإِنْ أَصَابَتْهُ ضَرَّاءٌ صَبَرَ  
فَكَانَ خَيْرًا لَهُ

*How wonderful are the affairs of the believer! His whole affair is good, and that is not for anyone but the believer. If fortune befalls him, he is grateful, and that is better for him. And if misfortune befalls him, he is patient, and that is better for him.*

*(Ṣaḥīḥu Muslim, Book 55, Ḥadīth 82)*

In these two verses and one tradition, we see that ‘good’ and ‘bad’ operate at two different levels of meaning. The first level is the one we have been discussing so far – the world of seemingly random events in which ‘bad things happen to good people,’ where fortune and misfortune alternate like day and night on the calendar, or like high and low on a topographical map of mountainous terrain. But there is another dimension, where the virtues of humility, gratitude, and patience appear, liberated from the tumult of cause and effect below. We can thus distinguish between a physical realm of pleasant or unpleasant events, on the one hand, and an ethical realm of real good and evil.

كُتِبَ عَلَيْكُمُ الْقِتَالُ وَهُوَ كُرْهٌ لَّكُمْ وَعَسَى أَن تَكْرَهُوا شَيْئًا وَهُوَ خَيْرٌ لَّكُمْ وَعَسَى أَن تُحِبُّوا شَيْئًا وَهُوَ شَرٌّ لَّكُمْ وَاللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ وَأَنْتُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ

**Fighting is prescribed for you, whereas you detest it. Perchance you hate a thing, but it is good for you. And perchance you love a thing, but it is bad for you. And GOD knows [what is good and bad] and you do not. (Q2:216)**

From this perspective, an element of uncertainty is required for our judgements of good and bad in this world, spurring us to honest self-examination: ‘Do we condemn something because it is morally wrong, or simply because we dislike it?’

In debating the existence of God, people tend to assume that ‘bad,’ meaning misfortune, and ‘evil,’ meaning malevolence, are the same. Without bickering unduly about what words to use, we can still point out a clear distinction between malicious harm, or evil, and what I would call providential harm. When I punish my child, for example, the act is experienced as harmful by the child. He or she protests, becomes upset, and may even feel angry at the ‘injustice’ of it. But with time and maturity, the child comes to know that the punishment was not malicious; there was no evil intent. Rather the parent’s desire to guide, protect, and improve becomes apparent as the child grows older, and her trust in that parent may even grow stronger with the realization that not all ‘harm’ is harmful.

Here we are using ‘harm’ in two ways. The first sense is basically physical and emotional, and relates to events and feelings. We feel sorrow at the death of our aged mother or infant daughter, for example. Yet we can also say, ‘Maybe this was better for her.’ And what we indicate by that is the latter sense, a spiritual realm in which pain and feelings are dissolved in the water of a stronger solution, namely the growth of the soul and its ultimate happiness.

For the atheist who denies the existence of an Everafter, the occurrence of adversity or tragedy makes no sense for precisely this reason: there is no ultimate beyond, no recompense or rationale in another, higher plane of being. Atheists who insist that a perfect being, namely God, and a natural catastrophe, for example, cannot coexist are arguing thus because they only have this one dimension. It is not actually evil that excludes the possibility of God, but rather their frame of reference, their initial judgement that this is all reality is. Once you open the doors and windows and let in some other-worldly light, however, the problem of evil looks appropriately small.

يُؤْتَى يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ بِأَنعَمِ أَهْلِ الدُّنْيَا مِنَ الْكُفَّارِ فَيَقَالُ اغْمِسُوهُ فِي النَّارِ  
غَمْسَةً فَيُغْمَسُ فِيهَا ثُمَّ يُقَالُ لَهُ أَيْ فُلَانُ هَلْ أَصَابَكَ نَعِيمٌ قَطُّ فَيَقُولُ  
لَا مَا أَصَابَنِي نَعِيمٌ قَطُّ وَيُؤْتَى بِأَشَدِّ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ ضُرًّا وَبَلَاءً فَيَقَالُ  
اغْمِسُوهُ غَمْسَةً فِي الْجَنَّةِ فَيُغْمَسُ فِيهَا غَمْسَةً فَيَقَالُ لَهُ أَيْ فُلَانُ هَلْ  
أَصَابَكَ ضُرٌّ قَطُّ أَوْ بَلَاءٌ فَيَقُولُ مَا أَصَابَنِي قَطُّ ضُرٌّ وَلَا بَلَاءٌ

*On the Day of Resurrection, the happiest of the worldly unbelievers will be brought, and it will be said, "Dip him once in the Fire." So he will be immersed in it, then he will be asked, "You there! Have you ever been happy?" He will answer, "No; I have never felt happiness." And the believer who suffered the greatest hardship and distress will be brought, and it will be said, "Set him once in Paradise." So he will be placed in it, then he will be asked, "You there! Have you ever had hardship or distress?" He will answer, "No, I have never felt hardship or distress."*

(Sunanub-ni Mājah, Book 37, Ḥadīth 4464)

Regarding the chain of reasoning mentioned earlier, we therefore can reply as follows:

1. However great the suffering we see or experience in this world, we cannot justly term it evil. We may call it bad, harmful, tragic, or catastrophic, depending on how we feel, but it could still turn out to be ultimately better for us. We simply do not know enough to judge.
2. A compassionate God would want to make these unfortunate events work towards our spiritual growth.
3. An omniscient, omnipotent God would be able to prevent these from occurring, but doing so could leave us drifting endlessly in a galactic Teletubby daycare facility.

4. Yes, an all-knowing, all-powerful, loving God is the leading option for monotheists.
5. The existence of GOD and the existence of misfortunes do not clash. GOD exists to comfort the believers in their misfortunes, and to welcome the unbelievers who find this life unbelievably bad as soon as they decide to return – to His Life.
6. Therefore GOD could exist. (Nothing proves GOD, for nothing is equal to Him.)

The discontented atheist will not take this good news lying down, however. ‘You have hardly mentioned the truly damning charge against God,’ he will say – ‘the existence of moral evil. If God is both All-Knowing and All-Powerful, how can He escape responsibility for that?’

## 7.

# INVENTING EVIL



It almost seems like God is setting Himself up for blame when He claims to be the Creator of everything. What, everything? The bad as well as the good? I dealt with benefit and harm as natural events that elicit positive or negative reactions from us, and suggested that our feelings are unreliable guides to what those happenings actually mean. They might hurt us now, but work to our ultimate benefit, or might please us now, yet be the seal on our spiritual doom. We have no certain way of knowing until the Day of Judgement.

فَذَرَّهُمْ فِي غَمَرَتِهِمْ حَتَّىٰ حِينٍ  
أَيُحْسَبُونَ أَنَّكُمْ تُمِدُّهُمْ بِهِ مِنْ مَّالٍ وَبَنِينَ  
يُسَارِعُ لَهُمْ فِي الْخَيْرَاتِ بَلْ لَا يَشْعُرُونَ

**So leave them in their stupefaction for a while. / Do they believe that what We have dispensed to them of wealth and children / Will accelerate their gaining good? No, they are not aware. (Q23:54–56)**

But what about the unnatural wickedness that is so human and so common, the malice, callousness, arrogance, and sheer stupidity that cause suffering, of course, but more importantly, produce moral outrage? As the Creator of all, does not God create that evil too? And then, to compound this Divine complicity in vice, He presumes to condemn and punish what He made and foreordained! This makes God not only the Creator of crime but also an almighty hypocrite, torturing us for things that began with Him!

Let us look at how it starts.

إِذْ قَالَ رَبُّكَ لِلْمَلَائِكَةِ إِنِّي خَالِقٌ بَشَرًا مِنْ طِينٍ  
 فَإِذَا سَوَّيْتُهُ وَنَفَخْتُ فِيهِ مِنْ رُوحِي فَقَعُوا لَهُ سَاجِدِينَ  
 فَسَجَدَ الْمَلَائِكَةُ كُلُّهُمْ أَجْمَعُونَ  
 إِلَّا إِبْلِيسَ اسْتَكْبَرَ وَكَانَ مِنَ الْكَافِرِينَ  
 قَالَ يَا إِبْلِيسُ مَا مَنَعَكَ أَنْ تَسْجُدَ لِمَا خَلَقْتُ بِإِيْدِي أَلَسْتُ بِأَمْرًا كُنْتَ  
 مِنْ الْعَالِينَ  
 قَالَ أَنَا خَيْرٌ مِنْهُ خَلَقْتَنِي مِنْ نَارٍ وَخَلَقْتَهُ مِنْ طِينٍ  
 قَالَ فَاهْرُجْ مِنْهَا فَاتَّكُ رَجِيمٌ  
 وَإِنَّ عَلَيْكَ لَعْنَتِي إِلَى يَوْمِ الدِّينِ

[Consider] when your Lord said to the angels, “Truly I am going to create a human out of clay. / When I have made him balanced and inspired in him of My Spirit, fall before him in prostration.” / So the angels made prostration altogether. / Not Iblīs, however – he was proud, becoming one of the rejecters. / [GOD] said, “O Iblīs, what prevented your prostrating unto what I made with My Two Hands? Were you conceited, or have you become exalted? / He replied, “I am superior to him. You made me out of fire, and You made him out of clay. / [GOD] said, “Get out, for truly you are damned. / And verily My curse is on you till the Day of Judgement.” (Q38:71-78)

If someone were to ask, ‘Did this really happen?’ the answer is, ‘Not only did it really happen,<sup>K</sup> it happens every day, to everyone, male and female.’ (In the translation above, I have used “him” as the referring pronoun, just as in Arabic, but this can be understood as a default, unisex pronoun for both Arabic and English.) At every human birth, all these elements are present. And every day of our lives, we find our angelic forces eager to serve us, and our satanic party unwilling.

What GOD creates belongs to the world of cause and effect, influenced by its primary material substrate – clay for man, fire for the *jinn* (including Iblīs), and light for the angels – and by its regular arrangement, indicated in this instance by **made him balanced**. These are actions upon the physical world, analogous to those that created seven levels of meaning out of a highly symbolic and yet physical sky (Q2:29). (See Chapter 42 for a lengthier discussion of the heavens and their potential meanings.) The human physical form belongs to this material realm, and is not even a distinguished part of it (reminiscent of how many of today’s environmentalists talk about the human race).

## K

‘Really’ is often understood to mean ‘literally.’ A literal reading of the Qur’ān would have us ‘see’ a God with two physical hands (infinitely large? and why only two?), a face (with a nose? a beard?), and other attributes mentioned earlier in Chapter 4. A symbolic reading of the same references would displace ‘really’ to a greater realm in which two hands and a face mean more than what we understand by a physical, literal conception of them. Terms such as “Two Hands” and “Face of GOD” are vehicles that let us embark at one point, in our mundane, literal mode of thought, and disembark at another, higher point of awareness that is no longer obsessed with literal readings. The purpose of the ‘ride’ is to get our feelings to take us to where our thoughts do not normally go by themselves, particularly if we are used to thinking in concrete images, as most of us are.

Take, for example, the idea of ‘create’ – **Truly I am going to create a human out of clay.** For thousands of years now, theologians’ first impressions of this story depicted an instantaneous, full-blown production process, contracting months of work, like that of an expert sculptor on a single piece of sculpture, into a matter of, say, minutes or seconds. In view of what we have learned in the meantime from scientific fields such as archaeology, paleontology, geology, biology, chemistry, and astronomy, we turn back to the Qur’ān with fresh eyes and find plenty of evidence that, yes, the modern scientific view of creation as a long, continuous process (e.g., in **Q39:6** and **Q71:14**) has plenty of scriptural support, and that our previous, automatic interpretation of how things work is not the only one. Creation literally occurred – but not as we have been imagining it – and is occurring now, around and in us, all the time. Our view of creation has expanded (as in **Q51:47**) and in many ways become more real.

Another example is the reference to **a human**, indicating a single individual. But the same word, in the same indefinite form, can mean humans (**Q5:18**) or even humanity (**Q30:20**). And so there is not one but several possible literal readings, including **Truly I am fashioning the human race from clay.** The events are cast in the past for the sake of narrative clarity, but there is no reason to think that they happened only once, given that the Arabic word for the act of creation is in fact a verbal noun indicating an identity or constant state of affairs (literally translated as **[I am] a Creator of ...**). Once again, further study expands our narrow view of what is literal into a broader conception of reality.

By the same light, therefore, we can enlarge our understanding of the dialogue in **Q38:71–80** to speech in the greater sense of expressions of attitudes, relationships, and spiritual realities. Most of us are familiar with

K (continued)

the idea of ‘body language’ – transmission of nonverbal meanings that are usually more revealing and reliable than the words accompanying them. We have a preview of the greater reality inherent in body language in this remarkable passage:

وَقَالُوا لِلْجُلُودِهِمْ لِمَ شَهِدْتُمْ عَلَيْنَا قَالُوا أَنْطَقَنَا اللَّهُ الَّذِي أَنْطَقَ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ وَهُوَ خَلَقَكُمْ أَوَّلَ مَرَّةٍ وَإِلَيْهِ تُرْجَعُونَ

They said to their own skins, “Why have you testified against us?” They replied, “AL-LĀH, Who gave to everything the power of speech, has made us speak. He fashioned you at first, and unto Him are you returned.” (Q41:21)

And this is relevant as well:

تُسَبِّحُ لَهُ السَّمَاوَاتُ السَّبْعُ وَالْأَرْضُ وَمَنْ فِيهِنَّ وَإِنْ مِنْ شَيْءٍ إِلَّا يُسَبِّحُ بِحَمْدِهِ وَلَكِنْ لَا تَفْقَهُونَ تَسْبِيحَهُمْ إِنَّهُ كَانَ حَلِيمًا غَفُورًا

The seven heavens and the earth and those within them glorify Him. Everything exalts His praises; you, however, do not understand their exaltations. Truly He has ever been Forbearing, Pardoning. (Q17:44)

Such verses demonstrate that what is often considered to be literal is merely a scaled-down rendering of a complex, abstract, or otherwise inaccessible truth. What is ‘really’ happening may be too great for us to comprehend other than in terms that are derived from our everyday experiences. The Qur’ān is constantly trying (figuratively, of course) to widen our spatiotemporal frame of reference and get us to embrace what is literally too much for our poor minds to take in without some metaphorical aid.

لَخَلْقُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ أَكْبَرُ مِنْ خَلْقِ النَّاسِ وَلَكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ النَّاسِ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ

The making of the heavens and the earth is greater than the making of humanity, but most of humankind lacks knowledge. (Q40:57)

However, as I have indicated previously, and as the idea of moral evil itself suggests, there is more to reality than material creation. AL-LĀH Himself makes this clear by mentioning, after Creation, another, greater Force. (See Chapter 42 for a more detailed explanation of this.)



أَلَا لَهُ الْخَلْقُ وَالْأَمْرُ تَبَارَكَ اللَّهُ رَبُّ الْعَالَمِينَ

**Truly His are the Creation and Command. Blessed be AL-LĀH, The Master of the worlds! (Q7:54)**

What is this **Command**? On the one hand, it overrules creation to give it a particular direction or purpose. As it refers to the material realm, this is the Command of power.

أَلَمْ تَرَى أَنَّ اللَّهَ سَخَّرَ لَكُمْ مَا فِي الْأَرْضِ وَالْفُلْكَ تَجْرِي فِي الْبَحْرِ بِأَمْرِهِ

**Do you not see that GOD has made subordinated to you everything on earth, and ships that sail on the sea by His Command? (Q22:65)**

On the other hand, as in the story of Iblīs, the Command of GOD may be resisted or ignored. This is the Command of obligation, requiring obedience for its performance.

قَالَ مَا مَنَعَكَ أَلَّا تَسْجُدَ إِذْ أَمَرْتُكَ

**He said, “What prevented your prostrating when I gave you the Command? (Q7:12)**

The very same word for ‘Command,’ **amr**, is also used in reference to any business or concern. Sometimes, therefore, the word is obscure, and intentionally so, perhaps to suggest all three meanings.

وَيَسْأَلُونَكَ عَنِ الرُّوحِ قُلِ الرُّوحُ مِنْ أَمْرِ رَبِّي وَمَا أُوتِيتُمْ مِنَ الْعِلْمِ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا

**They question you about the Spirit. Say, “The Spirit is derived from [or deals with] the order [or the business] of my Master, and no knowledge has been given you except a little.” (Q17:85)**

The angels and the *jinn*, prior recipients of GOD’s Spirit, represent the ambivalent potential of the spiritual element in mankind. The angels are creatures of light and harmony, and although they may have doubts and questions (as in **Q2:30**), they are always receptive to more knowledge, and yield to it. The *jinn*, contrarily, are creatures of passion and instability, and although some of them are submissive, they are generally inclined to be arrogant and envious, as was Iblīs. His **I** is the first statement of egotism

in the Qur'ān; he is also the original racist (regarding fiery beings as better than clay beings) and the father of bigotry in all its forms. He became fixated on his material superiority to the point of ignoring GOD's Authority and forgetting the Spirit as **the order of my Master**.

The presumption of evil begins here, at the mysterious heart of what it is to be a spiritual being. The angels manifest the Spirit's presence in their obedience, their knowledge, and even in their doubts, which are dispelled by greater light. Iblīs manifests the Spirit's absence<sup>L</sup> by ignorance, forgetfulness, and pride. Evil in

its defiance is altogether irrelevant to the physical world, where fire, whether on earth or in the sun and stars, is totally obedient to GOD. But in the moral realm, where commands of obligation replace commands of power, the devil deems himself under no

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No living thing, including Iblīs, is altogether without Spirit, and nothing but GOD Himself is wholly Spirit. Presence and absence of Spirit in creatures are to be understood as descriptors of relative position on a scale, not absolute points at either end.

obligation. He has declared himself free. No wonder, then, that GOD curses him and tells him to **Get out**. Evil, which never had a hold on the physical aspect of reality, is pronounced not only banished from the spiritual realm but also 'free' of reality itself.

Here is the paradox of evil. It claims to be something, but is nothing. It seems to be everywhere, but is nowhere. Evil is neither created nor commanded by GOD. It is a will without a wisp, a blank shot in the infinite dark.

وَالَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا أَعْمَالُهُمْ كَسَرَابٍ بِقِيَعَةٍ يَحْسَبُهُ الظَّمْآنُ مَاءً حَتَّىٰ إِذَا جَاءَهُ لَمْ يَجِدْهُ شَيْئًا وَوَجَدَ اللَّهَ عِنْدَهُ فَوَقَّاهُ حِسَابَهُ وَاللَّهُ سَرِيعُ الْحِسَابِ

**And as for those who disbelieve, their deeds resemble a mirage upon a plain. The thirsty person thinks it to be water. Then, when he arrives, he finds it nothing; there he finds AL-LĀH, Who pays him what his thought is worth. And GOD is Swift in reckoning. (Q24:39)**

If evil is nothing, would that not apply to its opposite as well? Could we not with equal reason claim that good is also nothing? But if good is something, then evil, the contrary force, should be too.

وَاللَّهُ خَلَقَكُمْ وَمَا تَعْمَلُونَ

And GOD created you and what you do. (Q37:96)

ذَلِكُمُ اللَّهُ رَبُّكُمْ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ خَالِقُ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ فَاعْبُدُوهُ

That is GOD, your Lord. There is no god but He – Creator of all things – so worship Him. (Q6:102)

Our good and evil acts are created, just as we ourselves are, since both our corporeal forms and our physical acts belong to the natural order of things. We call actions good or evil either because their effects are beneficial or harmful or because of the intentions that are their causes. The same applies to good or bad events; we characterize them as one or the other by the extent of their benefit or harm. But if good and evil in themselves are neither events nor acts,<sup>M</sup> we have no reason to consider them created. They belong, rather, to a realm of their own.

#### M

In other words, good and evil are qualia, properties of things rather than real things themselves, and should be understood primarily as adjectives. (A more complete discussion of things, reality, and real things can be found in Chapter 42 and Appendix 1.) We do not argue over whether silliness or triviality, for example, exists; these nouns function rather as adjectives converted into noun form to facilitate flexibility of expression.

وَإِنْ تُصِيبَهُمْ حَسَنَةٌ يَقُولُوا هَذِهِ مِنْ عِنْدِ اللَّهِ وَإِنْ تُصِيبَهُمْ سَيِّئَةٌ سَيِّئَةٌ يَقُولُوا هَذِهِ مِنْ عِنْدِكَ قُلْ كُلُّ مِنْ عِنْدِ اللَّهِ فَمَالِ هَؤُلَاءِ الْقَوْمِ لَا يَكَادُونَ يَفْقَهُونَ حَدِيثًا  
مَا أَصَابَكَ مِنْ حَسَنَةٍ فَمِنَ اللَّهِ وَمَا أَصَابَكَ مِنْ سَيِّئَةٍ فَمِنْ نَفْسِكَ

If they gain a benefit, they say that “This is from AL-LĀH.” But if they come across misfortune, they say, “This is due to you.” Say, “All is from AL-LĀH.” What is the matter with this folk? They fail to understand what they are told. / What befalls you of good fortune is from GOD. And what befalls you of misfortune is from your own self. (Q4:78-79)

In Arabic, just as in English, ‘good’ and ‘evil’ are used indiscriminately for favourable and unfavourable events, on the one hand, and for moral and immoral intentions on the other. When we are told **All is from AL-LĀH**, we know this is so because GOD is the Creator of all things, in the realm where His Command represents power. Then, when we are told that **good fortune is from GOD**, and that misfortune is from ourselves, our attention is elevated to the higher moral realm where GOD’s Command is obligation, and where the origins of good and evil are absolutely opposed.

So why is evil from us, and not from Satan, as was mentioned earlier? Because – continuing the story from earlier in this Chapter – although Iblīs was told to **Get out** (of the self and its material form) he asked for time, and was granted it.

قَالَ رَبِّ فَأَنْظِرْنِي إِلَى يَوْمِ يُبْعَثُونَ  
قَالَ فَإِنَّكَ مِنَ الْمُنْظَرِينَ

He said, “My Lord, reprieve me to the day when they are raised [from death].” [GOD] replied, “Indeed, you are of the reprieved. (Q38:79-80)

If we are looking for evil, then here, within ourselves, is where we will find it – temporarily.

إِنَّ الشَّيْطَانَ يَبْلُغُ مِنَ الْإِنْسَانِ مَبْلَغَ الدَّمِ وَإِنِّي حَشِيتُ أَنْ يَفْذِفَ فِي  
قُلُوبِكُمْ شَيْئًا

*“Verily Satan’s reach is as far as the blood in the human being. I feared that he had cast something into your hearts.”*

*(Ṣaḥīḥul-Bukhārī, Book 33, Ḥadīth 10)*

Evil, therefore, is the lie that lies within – a black hole at the heart of who we are. It ‘tries’ desperately to be something, and is given time in this world to show what, if anything, it is. Good, on the other hand, is from GOD Himself, and thus is free of haste, fear, and all other temporal concerns. It is not a thing at all, but rather is even more real – divinely so. When all the things of this world have perished, good will remain forever.

As darkness is the absence of light, so is evil the absence of good. But why should we even believe in Satan, the personification of evil, if evil itself does not exist?

## 8.

# PERSONIFYING EVIL



The topic of personality or personhood is a controversial one in philosophy, and literally so, in my opinion, for just as the Latin etymology of ‘controversy’ refers to ‘being turned in an opposite direction,’ I consider some form of opposition to be the very essence of a person.

Inanimate matter is at one with its environment. Plant life is distinct from its environment, but rooted in it. Animals take one step further on the path to personhood, figuratively and literally; they are motile, or capable of moving through their environment. Persons do the same, of course, but self-consciously; they intentionally contrast themselves with their environment and identify themselves in opposition to it.<sup>N</sup> The details and degrees of this distinction are matters of elaborate discussion among philosophers, but few would deny that some sense of a separate self is fundamental to being a person in comparison to being an insect, a shrub, or a stone.

The First Person, in more ways than can be mentioned here, is GOD. In His Divine Unicity and Absolute-ness GOD is Alone, and hence has no environment whatsoever; in this sense GOD is All there is, and so Beyond

personhood. But if, given our limited perspective, we conceive of GOD as a separate entity, somehow removed from His creation (which in absolute

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This could be why ‘No’ is such a popular first word with children in the early stages of their development as they start to distinguish themselves from their parents. On a grander scale, one might extrapolate from what we see in children to wonder whether Iblīs is the prime symbol of this pressing need to say ‘No.’

And yet the supreme statement of faith in Islam, by which one becomes a Muslim person, also begins with a distinguishing ‘No’: [There is] no god but AL-LĀH.

terms He is not), then we might say that GOD is The First Person – unimaginably transcendent relative to all that He creates.

Are angels persons? We know they are innumerable, and in many ways inconceivable.

إِنِّي أَرَى مَا لَا تَرَوْنَ وَأَسْمَعُ مَا لَا تَسْمَعُونَ إِنَّ السَّمَاءَ اطَّتْ وَحُقَّ  
لَهَا أَنْ تَنُطَّ مَا فِيهَا مَوْضِعُ أَرْبَعِ أَصَابِعٍ إِلَّا وَمَلَكٌ وَاضِعٌ جَبْهَتَهُ  
سَاجِدًا لِلَّهِ

*Truly I see what you do not see, and hear what you do not hear. Verily heaven is groaning, and it is right to groan. There is no space of four fingers' width but has the forehead of an angel on it, prostrating to GOD.*  
(Sunanub-ni Mājah, Book 37, Ḥadīth 4330)

We also know that they live in total subservience to GOD.

يَخَافُونَ رَبَّهُمْ مِنْ فَوْقِهِمْ وَيَفْعَلُونَ مَا يُؤْمَرُونَ

**They fear their Lord above them, and they do what is commanded them. (Q16:50)**

Given this complete subjection to GOD's will, how can they be said to be persons at all? It could be their God-fearingness and utter humility that delineates them most sharply as individuals. The perfection of their perspective, their sheer willingness to abase themselves and look up to Him in contrast to, and yet complementing, His downward gaze, is the very pinnacle of their personality, and makes them, moreover, models for our own approaches to the Divine.

For most modern Western individualists, this is too large a dose of spiritual medicine to swallow, and so it proved for Iblīs. As a member of the race of *jinn*, he had not been expected to match the angels' fervent adoration. After spending thousands of years in diligent worship of GOD, however, he was granted a place of honour among them, and was present when AL-LĀH created the first human.

The difference between his motivation and that of the angels became apparent when AL-LĀH commanded them to prostrate themselves out of respect to Ādam. The angels had been worshipping AL-LĀH for His sake only, associating nothing with Him, and so fell down in prostration instantly. For them, GOD's command was absolute and beyond question. But Iblīs had been worshipping GOD on the basis of reasoned reflection – or, more accurately, as a matter of conscience (from Latin *conscientia*, i.e.,

"knowledge within oneself")<sup>2</sup> – leading him to believe that the same superiority by which GOD deserved his worship ought to be applied within His creation. He believed that AL-LĀH had no right to issue an order that violated what he thought to be the rational order of the universe – one in which he, Iblīs, had a unique and privileged station. It made no sense to him, for he had been unconsciously equating AL-LĀH with something else, namely his own conception of what Divinity should be. This secret egotism and blinkered rationality were his downfall.

When challenged to explain himself, Iblīs did not back down. Many modern commentators would consider this refusal to be a sign of courage, growth, empowerment, individual autonomy, or whatever the latest slogan happens to be. Some might see this in the light of a child becoming an adult by standing up to his father for the first time and dealing with him on equal terms. But AL-LĀH is not a father, except metaphorically, for He does not age or die, nor is He in need of children to satisfy Himself, manifest His Qualities, or communicate with us. Neither does a human father create his children, possess absolute power, or deserve unconditional obedience. In equating GOD's Authority to that of a father who can be questioned and defied, modern critics of monotheism commit the same mistake made by Iblīs (which is no coincidence).

Prior to his defiance, Iblīs had distinguished himself as the angels had, by the polarity of their servanthood vis-à-vis GOD's Lordship. But by refusing, Iblīs acquired a new personality, one which has since been transmitted to his descendants and become a defining feature of a class of persons known as *shayāṭīn* (devils) in the plural or *Shaiṭān* (Satan) in the singular. Their whole purpose in life is to justify and magnify that initial act of opposition, to make it as real and pervasive as possible – to subvert the very order of the universe if they can.

Unlike the angels whose personalities are formed around a complementary contrast to GOD, the devils have made their spiritual conflict with AL-LĀH the very essence of their lives' work. But at the heart of this satanic mission lies a vital contradiction (another trait typical of persons). They remain creatures of AL-LĀH, and are dependent on His reprieve for their continued activity. Furthermore, they know that He is GOD, acknowledge His Supremacy, and fear Him accordingly. In that sense, at least, they are closer to Him than the vast majority of the human race. (Thus Satan is not an atheist.)

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<sup>2</sup> From the entry in Wiktionary, <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/conscience>.

وَإِذْ زَيْنَ لَهُمُ الشَّيْطَانُ أَعْمَالَهُمْ وَقَالَ لَا غَالِبَ لَكُمْ الْيَوْمَ مِنَ النَّاسِ  
وَإِنِّي جَارٌ لَكُمْ فَلَمَّا تَرَأَتِ الْفِئَتَانِ نَكَصَ عَلَى عَقَبَيْهِ وَقَالَ إِنِّي  
بَرِيءٌ مِنْكُمْ إِنِّي أَرَى مَا لَا تَرَوْنَ إِنِّي أَخَافُ اللَّهَ وَاللَّهُ شَدِيدُ الْعِقَابِ

[Recall] when Satan beautified their deeds for them and said, “No one among mankind can triumph over you today, and truly I am guarding you.” But when each army saw the other, he retreated, saying, “I am free of you; I see what you do not. I fear AL-LĀH – and GOD is Strict in punishment.” (Q8:54)

Let us grant him this much: it takes an awful lot of *chutzpah* to know this, to say this, and yet to keep on working against the One you fear. Only beings of bottomless pride and indomitable resolve – certainly nothing inanimate – could muster the energy to continue with such a hopeless cause.

So does a devil have a personality? Tons of it, obviously – more than most humans appear to have. And are devils persons? Not only are they persons, they can take over, (i.e., possess in part or in total), human identities. We may have had a personal encounter with a devil (not the Devil, for ‘he’ is legion) on many occasions without realizing it. For Satan is a master of disguise as well as deception, and can take various forms without breaking a sweat.

You may think that this is all pious tale-telling and folklore, since you have probably never seen a devil (nor an angel, for that matter) or felt him working on you. But if a person is defined by the extent to which he consciously distinguishes himself from his surroundings, visibility in a visible environment is certainly not the only path to take. And just to be clear, a person is never seen, only inferred (i.e., believed to exist on the basis of indirect evidence). As I mentioned earlier, there are credible reasons to deny the reality of a single, persistent self in anyone; it could be nothing but an illusion derived from faulty mental habits.

In any case, a devil’s invisibility in a human, sight-bound world is a distinct personal advantage that in no way contradicts his intentionality, intelligence, or capacity for mischief.

إِنَّهُ يَرَاكُمْ هُوَ وَقَبِيلُهُ مِنْ حَيْثُ لَا تَرَوْنَهُمْ إِنَّا جَعَلْنَا الشَّيَاطِينَ أَوْلِيَاءَ  
لِلَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ

Indeed he and his tribe see you whence you do not see them. Indeed We made the devils guardians for those who have no faith. (Q7:27)



As for his not being ‘felt,’ particularly in our modern, Western, scientific milieu, what better disguise can there be than a cloak of invisibility and anonymity that allows him to go on working unchecked and unsuspected? Our relationship with Satan has become so symbiotic in this fast-paced, media-driven, secular culture that it now feels ‘natural’ – the way things have been, should be, and always will be. A satanic environment in which no one recognizes Satan is ideal (for him); neither the person nor the act is detected, but the influence of both is enhanced.

I believe, therefore, that in such an environment an awareness of devils and angels is essential to possessing a fully human personality. One cannot maintain a distinctive self without differentiating oneself from one’s environment, and in a satanic environment recognizing it as such and deliberately opposing it constitutes not only an essential part of the human identity but also provides keys to understanding oneself, one’s allies (the angels), and one’s God. We can begin to see ourselves as battlegrounds between our angelic and our satanic natures, with AL-LĀH presiding and judging.

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ قَالُوا رَبُّنَا اللَّهُ ثُمَّ اسْتَقَامُوا تَتَنَزَّلُ عَلَيْهِمُ الْمَلَائِكَةُ أَلَّا تَخَافُوا  
وَلَا تَحْزَنُوا وَأَبْشِرُوا بِالْجَنَّةِ الَّتِي كُنتُمْ تُوعَدُونَ  
نَحْنُ أَوْلِيَائُكُمْ فِي الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا وَفِي الْآخِرَةِ وَلَكُمْ فِيهَا مَا تَشْتَهُي  
أَنْفُسُكُمْ وَلَكُمْ فِيهَا مَا تَدْعُونَ  
نُزُلًا مِنْ غَفُورٍ رَحِيمٍ

Verily to those who say “Our Lord is GOD,” and then remain upright the angels come to tell them, “Fear not; do not grieve; and celebrate the Garden that is promised to you. / “We are your protectors in this worldly life and in the Everafter. Yours therein is what your souls desire; for you therein is that for which you pray, / “Accommodation from the One Who is Forgiving, Merciful.” (Q41:30–32)

قَالَ فِيمَا أُغْوِيْتَنِي لَأَقْعُدَنَّ لَهُمْ صِرَاطَكَ الْمُسْتَقِيمَ  
ثُمَّ لَا يَتَّبِعُهُمْ مِنْ بَيْنِ أَيْدِيهِمْ وَمِنْ خَلْفِهِمْ وَعَنْ أَيْمَانِهِمْ وَعَنْ شَمَائِلِهِمْ  
وَلَا تَجِدُ أَكْثَرَهُمْ شَاكِرِينَ

He said, “Because You have misled me, I shall sit in wait for them upon Your upright path. / Then I will come to them before them, and behind them, from their right, and from their left, and You will find that most of them are ingrates.” (Q7:16–17)

يَعِدُّهُمْ وَيُمْنِّيهِمْ وَمَا يَعِدُّهُمْ الشَّيْطَانُ إِلَّا غُرُورًا

**He vows to them and rouses their desires. And Satan only promises to them delusion. (Q4:120)**

What is this force that rouses our desires, connives at our delusions, runs through our blood, and strives with all its might for our everlasting ruin? These are acts that cry out to be countered by our own acts. If we are passive, allowing them to dominate us, what right do we have to consider ourselves as persons, rather than those who so actively exploit our weaknesses with diabolical cunning? By reclaiming our active stance vis-à-vis these aggressions, we regain our true personalities as conscious, willing opponents of the one whom GOD has termed our enemy.

Ultimately, just as we found GOD to be the pinnacle and perfection of all our positive absolutes, we will find Satan to be the ‘perfect’ foil, the fiendish aggregator of all that we detest: malice, deceit, ruthlessness, shamelessness, cowardice, injustice, and arrogance.

My contention, once again, is that evil, by which I mean strictly moral evil, is nothing, and produces nothing. I admit that ‘bad’ events occur, and generate both misery and outrage, but further say that either our spirit is fully capable of turning all that dirt into growth, or that GOD is fully prepared to repair those wrongs in a Life where suffering will not even be a memory.

‘But wait a minute,’ some readers will say. ‘You have come a long way on a rather dubious suggestion, namely that we ‘know’ God. Actually, we know nothing of the sort; we may have heard about God, the angels, the *jinn*, and Satan, and have opinions regarding good and evil, but we do not know that they are there at all, that they exist. This all seems based on surmise and pious dogma. But how true is it? Why not believe, instead, in something we can actually feel, namely ourselves?’

## 9.

# IDENTIFYING OURSELVES



### THE EVANESCENT SELF

كُلُّ نَفْسٍ ذَائِقَةُ الْمَوْتِ

Every soul is tasting death. (Q3:185)

عَنْ أَبِي هُرَيْرَةَ قَالَ قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ أَكْثَرُ مَا  
ذَكَرَ هَازِمُ اللَّذَاتِ

*From Abī Hurairah, who said, “The Messenger of AL-LĀH (may GOD bless him and give him peace) said, ‘Remember much the shearer of delights.’”*

*(Jāmi’ut-Tirmidhī, Book 36, Ḥadīth 4)*

Our yearning for permanence is brought up short against the brute fact of death. That fact is not just a future certainty; its presence is as palpable now as a bitter taste on the tongue. It tinges all our experiences with a tint of sepia, a tone of melancholy and imminent loss. But we are told to face it squarely, and then to enlarge its grim visage before our inner eye, for death reminds us not only of the void awaiting us, but also of the vacancy that preceded us.

وَقَدْ خَلَقْتُكَ مِنْ قَبْلِ وَلَمْ تَكُنْ شَيْئًا

I created you before, when you were nothing. (Q19:9)

We are like a question mark enclosed before and after by dark ellipses of unknowing, but even our ‘mark’ advances and recedes and changes shape like wavy lines the sea inscribes and then deletes in constant questioning upon the sand.

وَلَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ مِنْ سُلَالَةٍ مِنْ طِينٍ  
ثُمَّ جَعَلْنَاهُ نُطْفَةً فِي قَرَارٍ مَكِينٍ  
ثُمَّ خَلَقْنَا النُّطْفَةَ عَلَقَةً فَخَلَقْنَا الْعَلَقَةَ مُضْغَةً فَخَلَقْنَا الْمُضْغَةَ عِظَامًا  
فَكَسَوْنَا الْعِظَامَ لَحْمًا ثُمَّ أَنْشَأْنَاهُ خَلْقًا آخَرَ فَتَبَارَكَ اللَّهُ أَحْسَنُ الْخَالِقِينَ  
ثُمَّ إِنَّكُمْ بَعْدَ ذَلِكَ لَمَيِّتُونَ  
ثُمَّ إِنَّكُمْ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ تُبْعَثُونَ

Indeed, We did create mankind from an extract of clay. / And then We made him as a sperm drop in a deeply rooted lodging. / Then We made the drop a clinging clot, and then We made the clot a lump of meat, and then We made the lump as bones, and then We dressed the bones in flesh, and then We raised it as another creature. Blessed be AL-LĀH, The Best Creator! / Then after that you will indeed be dead. / Then on the Day of Resurrection you will surely be awakened. (Q23:12–16)

Notice the shift from the generic third-person **mankind** undergoing its various phases of embryonic development to the second-person **you** after being raised as **another creature**. But this **you** is promptly linked to death and then resurrection, as if admission to a personal identity comes with a price and a destination. It is by this transience, in contrast to the permanence of Divinity, that we finally come to know ourselves as persons distinct from GOD's Eternal Personality.

إِنَّكَ مَيِّتٌ وَإِنَّهُمْ مَيِّتُونَ

Truly you are dying, and indeed they too are dying. (Q39:30)

## THE SYNTHETIC SELF

The question posed by death is: What are you really believing when you believe in yourself?

An answer that immediately springs to my mind is ‘coincidence’ – a concurrence of multiple events. Like a proto-planet that, over time, attracts accretions as it wends its way through the dust and grit of interstellar space, a life begins with a vague impression of where it is and a set of imperative needs and wants. Through the two-handed sculpting of pains and pleasures, it learns to own its desires and aversions, to influence its

environment, and to interact with other lives.

The signals coming to it from the body and from the environment make no sense by themselves; they must be reinterpreted or patterned into units of meaning before they can be assimilated to previous impressions. The feeling it acquires of an independent self is not an a priori fact, a Cartesian ‘truth,’ but rather comes into play as the spine of its experience – the earliest, easiest, most reassuring, and most frequently reinforced assumption on which everything else it senses is founded. Like the first grain of dust around which an entire planet gathers by the force of gravity, a self starts out as little more than a mathematical point, a seminal act of meaning to which other units of meaning became attached by a process of mutual affirmation.

But the original ‘you,’ a drop of sperm fertilizing an egg in a womb, is not what you would call yourself now. Those layers of addenda in the shape of processed experiences and configured concepts have been parleyed into a self that encompasses multiple roles, such as child, sibling, parent, colleague, citizen, bystander, commuter, consumer, and so on, and selects memories and goals on an interim and adaptive basis. Each accretion must ‘fit’ if it is to become a part of you, and once attached, it adds a new wobble to your orbit and a revised definition of who you are even as it strengthens the underlying structure of self. Successes harden this assumed persona, and setbacks, failures, diseases, and disasters, like meteor showers, challenge it, reformulate it, or even break it apart. And all of these events, from the primal confluence of sperm and egg through to your latest artistic achievement or career milestone, occurred as products of circumstances and powers usually or totally beyond your control or even consciousness. In other words, you still are, and have always been, at the mercy of unfathomable decrees of fate. You are a process, not a single, settled entity.

You have accumulated too much, for too long, and in ways that you cannot begin to remember, to know all there is to know about you. When you consider yourself, you do not look from a global or comprehensive perspective; rather you select some aspects of that conglomeration that meet your temporary need for a ready image. Others see you differently – not as thoroughly, perhaps, for they lack the interest in you that you have, but with the same fragmentary approach. And that applies to everything else in your world. You do not see the tree in your back yard; rather you construct a rudimentary approximation of that tree for practical purposes and ‘work,’ in your mind, with that. The real tree is far too overwhelming for you to handle, like the mountain that crumbled before Mūsā (peace be

upon him) when the Light of GOD revealed every particle of it and caused him to swoon away in holy terror (Chapter 2).

Your entire experiential apparatus operates not to provide high-resolution fidelity but symbolic, associative, and workable abstractions from your experiences. What counts are the connections, not the details. Your whole world-picture, your very life as you feel it, is a swarm of emotions, images, and ideas hovering over a landscape of terrible clarity, a land which for you to touch now is to die. This cloud has condensed around the comfort zone of your earliest days on Earth, in conditions of epoch, place, class, and culture that defined what you think to be yourself before you could even think. You are not so much aware of yourself as accustomed to a narrative constantly being adjusted to cope with the feedback that you admit to maintain that narrative, or with experiences that break in upon you and devastate you until a tolerable revision can be concocted. That equivocal, unstable cloud of impressions is your world, offering only glimpses of excruciating realities below and magnificent serenities above. Your self was made there, along with everything else you think you know or believe.

اعْلَمُوا أَنَّمَا الْحَيَاةُ الدُّنْيَا لَعِبٌ وَلَهُمْ زِينَةٌ وَتَفَاخُرٌ بَيْنَكُمْ وَتَكَاثُرٌ فِي  
الْأَمْوَالِ وَالْأَوْلَادِ كَمَثَلِ غَيْثٍ أَعْجَبَ الْكُفَّارَ نَبَاتُهُ ثُمَّ يَهِيجُ فَتَرَاهُ  
مُصْفَرًّا ثُمَّ يَكُونُ حُطَامًا وَفِي الْآخِرَةِ عَذَابٌ شَدِيدٌ وَمَغْفِرَةٌ مِنَ اللَّهِ  
وَرِضْوَانٌ وَمَا الْحَيَاةُ الدُّنْيَا إِلَّا مَتَاعُ الْغُرُورِ

**Know that this worldly life is play, amusement, decoration, boasting to each other, and contending for pre-eminence in wealth and children, like a downpour that amazes farmers by the vegetation it produces, then it dries – you see it turning yellow – then it turns to scrap. And in the Everafter are a forceful castigation and forgiveness and approval from AL-LĀH. This worldly life is nothing but enjoyment of illusion. (Q57:20)**

So to the question ‘Who am I, really?’ death, the ever-present prompter, suggests this response, ‘You are a construct, an act of imagination. You may look reliably solid and complete, but that façade, with all its empty materialistic fallacies, is as nothing compared to its effect. These props and sets, which took years to prepare, will take only seconds to dismantle. But the performance that they were made for – what a show!’

In the theatre of the Everafter, it does not matter that the actors – the various personae who somehow present a semblance of dramatic unity

night after night – are two-bit players whom we would never recognize in their street clothes. Nor do we care whether their stage costumes are bought or borrowed, or whether the props are made of real wood or cardboard. All that counts are the quality of the acting and its faithfulness to the script. These are the realities we look and strive for. And only these truly justify our faith.

Do they exist? What about existence – does it exist? These Aristotelian categories of substance and accident, of universals and particulars, belong to another era, another stage in the growth of the human epic. All that matters is – what have you constructed? What is your story? What are you telling yourself and others? What do your actions say about what you really believe?

وَقُلْ اَعْمَلُوا فَسَيَرَى اللّٰهُ عَمَلَكُمْ وَرَسُولُهُ وَالْمُؤْمِنُونَ وَسَتُرَدُّونَ اِلَى  
عَالِمِ الْغَيْبِ وَالشَّهَادَةِ فَيُنَبِّئُكُمْ بِمَا كُنْتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ

And say, “Work, and GOD will see your work, and so too will the Messenger, and the believers. And you will be returned to One Who Knows the hidden and the manifest, and He will tell you what you used to do. (Q9:105)

## THE ABSOLUTE SELF

At the core of our being is an original reality, the point of light that witnessed its Lord. But we have almost no access to that memory in our daily lives. What we have is a construction around that point, a surrogate self that bears witness, usually false, to who we are. To dispel this miasma of conjectures, what in Arabic is called *ẓann*, we often turn to what is best and surest in ourselves, our absolutes. Death, meanwhile, looms over us, reminding us that any absolute that ends with ourselves is shockingly deficient and ultimately wrong. The Originating Source of all our absolutes, and the One Who knows us best and Whom we know best, is GOD.

وَأَسِرُّوا قَوْلَكُمْ أَوْ اجْهَرُوا بِهِ إِنَّهُ عَلِيمٌ بِذَاتِ الصُّدُورِ  
أَلَا يَعْلَمُ مَنْ خَلَقَ وَهُوَ اللَّطِيفُ الْخَبِيرُ

Hide what you say within or bring it forth; He knows what people’s hearts contain. / Would He not know what He created, being as He is The Subtle, The Aware? (Q67: 13–14)

Our situation is like a climber on a cliff face. The rope we have in our hands could be tied to some craggy protrusion next to us, and we could let ourselves down from this point. But no amount of concentration, skill, or wild upward tossing will enable us to fasten our hopes to the summit unless Someone above us catches our rope or, better still, lets down one of His own, to pull us up.

وَاَعْتَصِمُوا بِحَبْلِ اللَّهِ جَمِيعًا وَلَا تَفَرَّقُوا

**Hold firmly, all together, to the rope of GOD, and do not be divided.**  
(Q3:103)



The evanescent self, synthetic self, and absolute self are not three separate beings, but three ways of knowing ourselves as persons, and thereby knowing The Eternal, Undivided, and Simply Absolute GOD Who mysteriously fashioned each one of us around a primal point of resemblance.

فِي حَدِيثِ ابْنِ حَاتِمٍ عَنِ النَّبِيِّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ قَالَ إِذَا قَاتَلَ أَحَدُكُمْ أَخَاهُ فَلْيَجْتَنِبِ الْوَجْهَ فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ خَلَقَ آدَمَ عَلَى صُورَتِهِ

*In a tradition of Ibni Hātim from the Prophet (may GOD bless him and give him peace) who said, “When one of you fights his brother [in the faith], avoid the face, for truly AL-LĀH created Ādam in His image.”*

*(Ṣaḥīḥu Muslim, Book 45, Ḥadīth 152)*





*Photography:*  
Rastislav Durica

## ADVANCE

*Advancing into realms of light  
As dark to me as yonder grave,  
I seek the friends I held most dear  
And find that none but you are here.*

*But you are here to fill my sight  
Although my eyes in error gave  
Admittance, by forbidden gaze,  
To figures fed with empty praise.*

*With empty praise of famous men  
Pushed forward far by luck or lust  
I fumbled farther from the peace  
They too desire at their decease.*

*“Cease envying,” you warned me, “when  
You envy fools whose flimsy trust  
In things external helps delete  
The feeling of their soul’s defeat.”*

*Defeat had bowed me down with years  
As quietly as failure can,  
But when it whispered once, “Despair!”  
I raised my eyes and you were there.*

*And you were there, though I, in tears,  
Bewildered by the wiles of men,  
Could hardly recognize your face  
Until I saw that changeless grace.*

*That changeless grace, that ageless smile —  
Such as the angels worship — would  
Remain in sight though I were blind  
And tell my heart that you were kind.*

*That you were kind — would not denial  
Of light itself be understood  
More clearly than to so feebly say  
How you reduce the dark to day?*

*Today I wondered, when I tripped  
Upon my final, foolish pride,  
What wider minds were thinking of.  
I glanced at you and saw but love.*

*But love alone could not have stripped  
Away the fears which long defied  
My truthward steps if you had not  
Surpassed me far in stride of thought.*

*Thought jousts with all comparison  
In tournaments of guilt and grief  
Till you proclaim, "Put down your spear;  
There is no other champion here.*

*"No other champion here has won  
In any way but deep belief  
That the parts men play comprise a whole  
In one's own universal soul.*

*"Soul-satisfied were those who flew  
Through nameless lists of former days  
And gave, in fame's contempt, to me  
Their individuality.*

*"Duality of 'me and you,'  
Of 'here and there' at length betrays  
Your heart to false yet endless pain  
When all is joined in one again.*

*"Again, in you, I see the sage  
I taught, the poet I inspired,  
The hero slain at my command,  
The saint who held me by the hand.*

*"The hand of flesh of every age  
Is doomed to what it most desired.  
The horn sounds freely. Leave your lance.  
Unarmed, alone, with me, advance!"*

# 10.

## FIRST SYNOPSIS



1. GOD occupies the heart of every human being as the culmination of all of his/her highest ideals.
2. Our intimate and immediate knowledge of these ideals is clearer than our knowledge of ourselves.
3. This 'absolute' awareness is a witness to a Divine origin and experience that we all have had.
4. This Divinity speaks to us through symbols and analogies, of which the strongest is 'Light.'
5. Divine Light is too intense for us, so it is 'humanized' according to our varying capacities.
6. Life, Love, Power, Truth, and Peace are alternative absolutes manifesting Divine Light.
7. Absolute Divinity cannot be defined or categorized, and to ask 'what' He is makes no sense.
8. GOD is described symbolically as a Person, though He transcends our conception of Personality.
9. Because of our mental and linguistic limitations, GOD is better characterized by what He is not.
10. Divine Transcendence has no bounds, and thus there is no hard boundary between Him and us.
11. Reaching beyond His Aloneness, He expresses His Perfection in attributes and acts of Love.
12. AL-LĀH is at the very heart of all things, and His Presence infuses our identities with His.
13. Divine Love has opened up the space and time in which our hearts can seek His Truth.
14. The existence of suffering seems to negate the reality of a Loving, Omniscient, Omnipotent God.
15. But a world without pain, disaster, and death would be a tepid, static, bubble bath of a cosmos.

16. Much of what we know and enjoy as good arises from its contrast with and opposition to evil.
17. Evil as adversity and evil as wickedness are as different as pleasure is from moral excellence.
18. GOD's Love, Knowledge, and Power permit misfortunes and redirect them to higher ends.
19. Good and evil as moral entities (nouns, not adjectives) belong to the realm of the uncreated.
20. Good is a reflection of GOD Himself, and comes from Him. Evil is the lying invention of Satan.
21. Persons come into being by contrast with their environment. GOD as All is beyond personhood.
22. GOD vis-à-vis His creation is The First Person. Angels become persons by worshipping Him.
23. Devils become persons by opposing GOD. They seek settings where they can pass unrecognized.
24. We become complete persons by knowing angels and devils as our friends and foes, respectively.
25. Our personhood is delineated by our former nothingness, our evanescence, and our mortality.
26. Our personal identity is an act of imagination, constantly narrated and edited for self-reassurance.
27. But the core of this myth is an almost-forgotten, primal reality – a being that witnessed its Lord.

# 11.

## THE VITALITY OF FAITH



Given the urgent need to develop a coherent sense of self from our earliest days, the complexity of our surroundings, the flood of information that would overwhelm us if we were to process it all instantaneously, and the ever-pressing need to act on the basis of the minute amounts of data that we actually do process, we, like all sentient beings, are constrained to live by faith. Faith is not just a set of assumptions about how the world works; nothing is accomplished by mere hypothesizing. Rather faith is, in its most general sense, active affirmation – an intricate interplay of motivation, perception, assessment, and initiative. It can be thought of as a feedback loop or self-regulating system in which desires influence our intake of information, both sensory and supersensory, from which we derive motivated judgements that can, in turn, be translated into acts of will intended to strengthen, weaken, or alter our desires. Faith thus comprises elements of emotion, awareness, intelligence, and praxis, which together constitute an affirmation of someone or something.

Consider, just as an example, a boy's preparation for and participation in morning soccer practice.

This is, firstly, an affirmation of environmental probabilities – that it will not rain this morning, that the trip to the field will be safe, that the grass will be short enough to play on, and so forth. Other probabilities – that the playing field will be level (as it was last week), that daylight will be sufficient for the two hours of practice time, or that gravity will work the same way it always has – are automatically assumed. These latter probabilities include the bedrock assumptions of science, namely that there are laws that govern the universe in a regular, predictable, and intelligible manner, and that these laws are not subject to human will or preference. The boy affirms all these postulates by taking them for granted and acting as if they are true. He cannot prove them true (nor can scientists), but he affirms them nonetheless.

But besides his faith in what will or will not happen, and what has reliably happened in the past, this boy of ours has been encouraged and supported in certain beliefs regarding the value of what he has done or plans to do. It has been affirmed, first for him and then by him, that playing soccer is something he can do without blame, and be proud of too. Interwoven with this are cultural norms that also become items of faith, such as it being good for children to play sports, to do what they enjoy, to spend time with their peers, to strive to win, and to lose graciously. Perhaps he does not enjoy soccer, but affirms by going that it is good to satisfy the demands of his parents if they encourage blameless activities of this sort.

As our boy gets involved in his soccer practice, this framework of physical constants and ethical girders is retained subconsciously. In the meantime, he must attend to and react to facts on the ground and demands that arise moment by moment from those facts – to shoot, to pass, or to dribble, to anticipate the movement of the ball and other players, to attack or defend, to speed up or slow down, and so on. Here he enters a realm of seamless interplay between ‘is’ and ‘ought,’ where events and situations determine the needs of the instant, which in turn determine what facts are worth absorbing and what information can be safely ignored.

These two aspects of what he has learned to process as a single sequence of stances and circumstances, or as a passage through an integrated continuum spanning ‘hard’ facts and ‘soft’ imperatives, constitute the normal texture of our lives. Every moment of our existence comprises a foreground of ‘body’ that we pay close attention to, even though it represents but a tiny fraction of our total possible sensory experience, and a background of ‘soul,’ consisting of preferential or moral assessments that constantly nudge us towards the centre of our comfort zone. Both perspectives rely on faith – in a crude summary of physical phenomena, and in a set of spiritual principles we rarely question – to substitute for what could only be attained by years of scientific study or philosophical pondering. Faith is the shortcut to action that all of us take. And by faith, we affirm our own identities as persons who are real, however constructed, and worth saving.

Faith, therefore, is a natural, rational, and motivational response by not only humans but practically all sentient beings to a dynamic, over-informed, and ultimately unfathomable environment. Without it, we would never be able to navigate the intrinsically bewildering confusion of the two realms we inhabit – the world of so-called facts, which are shorthand notes about a flurry of mainly sensory phenomena, and the world of values, where we construct our normative models and sculpt our absolutes into the gods we live and die for.

Faith operates at the junction of action and cognition, and possesses the attributes of both. We are not accustomed to thinking of faith as praxis, but the reality that most of our faith-work is implicit, habitual, and unrecognized as such does not in any way alter its functional character. It is, in fact, described as the supreme act in this tradition:

عَنْ أَبِي هُرَيْرَةَ أَنَّ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ سُئِلَ أَيُّ الْعَمَلِ  
أَفْضَلُ فَقَالَ إِيْمَانٌ بِاللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ

*From Abī Hurairah, [who said] that the Messenger of AL-LĀH (may GOD bless him and give him peace) was asked, “Which action is the best?” He replied, “Faith in AL-LĀH and His Messenger.”*

*(Ṣaḥīḥul-Bukhārī, Book 2, Ḥadīth 19)*

In this case, of course, faith is conscious, deliberate, and directed towards the objects that are usually associated in the Qur’ān with faith, namely GOD and His Messenger. But more general forms of trust and confidence are also made out to be acts, as in the following texts:

وَقَالَ الزُّهْرِيُّ { قُلْ لَمْ تُؤْمِنُوا وَلَكِنْ قُولُوا أَسْلَمْنَا }  
قَالَ نَرَى أَنَّ الْإِسْلَامَ الْكَلِمَةُ وَالْإِيْمَانُ الْعَمَلُ

*Az-Zuhrī [a prominent scholar of aḥādīth in the first century of Islam] said [commenting on this verse] – Tell [them], “You do not have faith, but say, ‘We have submitted.’” – “We think that [the declaration of] submission is speech, while faith is action.”*

*(Sunanu Abī Dāwūd, Book 42, Ḥadīth 89)*

قَالَ أَبُو سَعِيدٍ سَمِعْتُ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ قَالَ مَنْ رَأَى  
مُنْكَرًا فَلْيُغَيِّرْهُ بِيَدِهِ فَإِنْ لَمْ يَسْتَطِعْ فَبِلِسَانِهِ فَإِنْ لَمْ يَسْتَطِعْ فَبِقَلْبِهِ وَذَلِكَ  
أَضْعَفُ الْإِيْمَانِ

*Abū Sa’īd said, “I heard the Messenger of AL-LĀH (may GOD bless him and give him peace) say, ‘Whoever sees an atrocity, then he should change it with his hand, and if he cannot, then by his tongue, and if he cannot, then in his heart. And that is the weakest form of faith.’”*

*(Sunanun-Nasā’ī, Book 47, Ḥadīth 24)*

Faith works at various levels of intensity, and their corresponding confirmatory actions, such as those of the hand, the tongue, and the heart, are its expressions. An avowal of truth that conforms to the secular definition of what faith should be and shrinks quietly away in the darkness of one’s



personal life does not have the affirmative power of a faith that dares to speak out publicly or strive to right wrongs.

عن أبي هريرة رضي الله عنه قال قال رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم أكمل المؤمنين إيماناً أحسنهم خلقاً وخياركم خياركم لنسائهم  
*From Abī Hurairah, who said, “The Messenger of AL-LĀH (may GOD bless him and give him peace) said, ‘The believers with the fullest faith are the loveliest in character, and the best of you are those who treat their womenfolk the best.’”*

*(Jāmi’ut-Tirmidhī, Book 1, Ḥadīth 278)*

Faith ‘spills over’ into associated types of behaviour. A commitment to GOD means adherence to all high ethical standards, not only specifically religious ones. (See Chapter 33 for a more detailed discussion.)

On the other hand, faith has a definitely spiritual aspect that is correlated in the Qur’ān with a surprising number of other terms used to describe an active mental life. Consider these two passages – first a set of four verses (Q30:21–24),

وَمِنْ آيَاتِهِ أَنْ خَلَقَ لَكُمْ مِنْ أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَزْوَاجًا لِتَسْكُنُوا إِلَيْهَا وَجَعَلَ  
 بَيْنَكُمْ مَوَدَّةً وَرَحْمَةً إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِقَوْمٍ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ  
 وَمِنْ آيَاتِهِ خَلْقُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَاخْتِلَافُ أَلْسِنَتِكُمْ وَالْوَاوِكُمْ إِنَّ  
 فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِّلْعَالَمِينَ  
 وَمِنْ آيَاتِهِ مَنَامُكُمْ بِاللَّيْلِ وَالنَّهَارِ وَابْتِغَاؤُكُمْ مِنْ فَضْلِهِ إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ  
 لَآيَاتٍ لِقَوْمٍ يَسْمَعُونَ  
 وَمِنْ آيَاتِهِ يُرِيكُمُ الْبَرْقَ خَوْفًا وَطَمَعًا وَيُنَزِّلُ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ مَاءً فَيُخْرِجُ  
 بِهِ الْأَرْضَ بَعْدَ مَوْتِهَا إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِقَوْمٍ يَعْقِلُونَ

And of His signs are His creating mates for you among yourselves that you might find repose with them, and having love and mercy come among you. Verily in that are signs for those who think. / And of His signs are the creation of the heavens and the earth and the variety of your tongues and colours. Indeed in that are signs for those who know. / And of His signs are that you dream by night and day, and that you seek His bounty. Verily in that are signs for those who hear. / And from His signs He lets you see the lightning bolt in fear and hope, and sends down water from the sky to bring the earth to life when it was dead. Indeed in that are signs for those who have intelligence.

followed by a parallel verse in the same *Sūrah* (Q30:37),

أَوَلَمْ يَرَوْا أَنَّ اللَّهَ يَبْسُطُ الرِّزْقَ لِمَنْ يَشَاءُ وَيَقْدِرُ إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ  
لِّقَوْمٍ يُؤْمِنُونَ

**Do they not see that GOD enlarges sustenance for whom He wills and limits it? Indeed in that are signs for people who have faith.**

The acts of thinking, knowing, listening, and intelligence are mentioned as correlates to the final form of deliberation, the act of believing. The refrain of **Verily in that are signs for those who ...** connects all of these as mindful responses that are in harmony with each other and with the external and internal worlds that they face.

In the Qur'ān, therefore, faith is much more than the farcical whimsy of Dodgson ("six impossible things before breakfast"), the proud irrationality of Tertullian ("I believe because it is absurd"), or Kierkegaard's passionate embrace of the impossible ("the only thing that can save him is the absurd, and this he grasps by faith"). Faith does not live at the margins of our lives, in the fiery declamations of sermons, or in the aphorisms of scholars. It is something even more common and compelling than it is in the Qur'ān, which refers to faith and the believers on almost every page. We do not have to reach far out of ourselves or deep within to find faith. From the moment we put our feet on (what we believe to be) the floor until we lay our head on (what we trust is) our pillow, and with every plan, opinion, decision, and emotion that forms in our mind or springs from our lips, we are affirming the reality and rightness of what is and what should be. We are all believers, and the one world we most definitely inhabit is the one we ourselves have made – the world as we believe it to be.

Does this give us eternal licence to believe whatever we want? Of course not. The bubble of belief we thought to be so vital to our continued sense of self eventually bursts, and the Truth that we fended off for so long with our personal concerns, comfortable habits, and precious theories of everything rushes in. Then, once again, we have faith, but it can no longer be described as ours. Faith and knowledge finally converge, and what we had of either suddenly seems as nothing.

مَا مَثَلُ الدُّنْيَا فِي الْآخِرَةِ إِلَّا مَثَلُ مَا يَجْعَلُ أَحَدُكُمْ إِصْبَعَهُ فِي الْيَمِّ  
فَلْيَنْظُرْ بِمِ يَرْجِعُ

**The likeness of this world in the Everafter is that of one of you who dips his finger in the ocean. Then let him see what he takes out of it.**

*(Sunanu Abī Dāwūd, Book 37, Ḥadīth 4247)*

## 12.

# THE DIVINITY OF FAITH



*Īmān*, the Arabic word for ‘faith,’ is built from the triadic root of ‘ – *m* – *n* (*ālif* – *mīm* – *nūn*), whence we derive the word *mu’min* for one who has faith, a believer. Other terms or concepts growing out of this root include confidence, reliance, trust, safety, protection, warrant, confirmation, corroboration, insurance, and assurance. Believers may tell us that their faith in GOD is enhanced and advanced by these semantic associations, but I wish to take this approach to GOD beyond the typical believer’s comfort zone by pointing out that one of the Names of AL-LĀH cited in the Qur’ān (Q59:23) is Al-Mu’min. And since He is The First in all that is good, we can safely (but controversially) assert that He is The First Believer.

Before we proceed, let me remind the reader again that all GOD’s Names are not limited to what we think they mean when viewed from the perspective of Absolute Transcendence. Al-Mutakabbir (The Proud), As-Samī’ (The Hearer), Al-Baṣīr (The Seer), Az-Zāhir (The Manifest), Al-Bāṭin (The Hidden), Aḍ-Ḍārr (The Distresser), and An-Nūr (The Light) are but some of the Names that cannot be understood literally lest they be interpreted as implying a defect, limitation, or material property. Other metaphorical expressions in the Qur’ān, such as GOD’s Hands, His Eye, His Face, and His Footstool, are likewise to be taken as divine condescension to our blinkered human imagination and in no way as representations of actual bodily organs or functions of the type we normally envision.<sup>o</sup> Expressions of this sort are planted in the heart to nourish our emotional

<sup>o</sup>

Many commentators, while granting that AL-LĀH does not have physical members (e.g., an Eye) or furniture (e.g., a Throne), insist that **the signs He explicates (Q13:2)** be understood literally, and yet refuse to specify

O (continued)

their actual features. If a ban is imposed on reasonable metaphorical connotations, however, such as awareness for ‘Eye’ or authority for ‘Throne,’ our mind has nowhere to turn in its natural, irrepressible thirst for meaning, but is tied down to a sign that was intended as the launching point, not the destination, of our thought. As a result, either a clandestine materialistic image builds up in the mind of the reader, despite the warnings against it, or the word, for lack of a significant connection with the reader’s experience, asphyxiates and becomes a lifeless object of a faith deprived of meaning.

When parts of the Qur’ān are walled off from the healthy, active mind by stern clerical warnings, a cramped, suffocating intellectual climate such as we see today in the Islamic world is the logical outcome.

If Divine Reality is to be literally affirmed, let it be by reverse metaphor: our eyes and thrones are but poor similitudes to His visual and authoritative Archetypes. We will surely discover this on the Day of Resurrection, when what we thought was abstract becomes painfully tangible and what we thought was solidly ours evaporates into formlessness – **a day on which the hearts and gazes will be overturned (Q24:37).**

life. Even while being fruitfully watered by our feelings and memories, these tropes need constant pruning by the mind.

Were it not for its undeniable presence in the Qur’ān and in the list of the ninety-nine Beautiful Names of AL-LĀH, Al-Mu’min would appear to be particularly unsuitable to qualify Divinity. For many of us, faith has numerous negative connotations, such as in the term ‘blind faith.’ It has been portrayed as a weak, second-rate substitute for knowledge, signifying a hunger for pat answers and emotional reassurance in the face of unpleasant truths like death. Rather than facing facts, faith is seen as fleeing into a cloud of its own making. So if a believer can be characterized by blindness, weakness, lack of knowledge, neediness, and unwillingness to face facts, how can it be right to consider GOD, The Possessor of only good qualities, to be ‘The First Believer’?

Translators and commentators skirt around this apparent difficulty by providing alternatives to the regular definition of *mu’min* as ‘faithful,’ ‘believing,’ or ‘believer.’ Thus we have translations such as “The Guardian of Faith,” “The Granter of Security,” “The Keeper of Faith,” and “The Bestower of Faith.” In his commentary on **Q59:23**, Ibnu Kathīr offers the

following quotes regarding the meaning of *Al-Mu'min*:

Aḍ-Ḍaḥḥāk said, from Ibnu 'Abbās – 'His creation is safe from Him wronging them.' And Qatādah said, 'He has guaranteed by His Word that it is true.' And Ibnu Zaid said, 'He has confirmed His believing servants in their faith in Him.'

AL-LĀH could easily have circumvented this awkwardness by selecting other Names, such as Aḍ-Ḍāmin, that would convey the same meanings without the uncomfortable resemblance to *mu'min*. Al-Mu'min was deliberately chosen, however; when does GOD do anything carelessly or inadvertently? It must be because of the resemblance, not in spite of it.

Actually, as we examine the meaning of *mu'min* more closely, we come to realize why it is elevated to prominence as one of GOD's Beautiful Names. Faith, as I said earlier (Chapter 11), is active affirmation. We tend to think of it as affirmation without evidence, as opposed to knowledge, which is based entirely on evidence. But this denigration of faith is a mistake. Faith without visible evidence is referred to as *al-īmānu bil-ghaib* – faith in the unseen, as in Q2:2–3:

ذَٰلِكَ الْكِتَابُ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهِ هُدًى لِّلْمُتَّقِينَ  
الَّذِينَ يُؤْمِنُونَ بِالْغَيْبِ وَيُقِيمُونَ الصَّلَاةَ وَمِمَّا رَزَقْنَاهُمْ يُنْفِقُونَ

**That is the Book in which there is no doubt, a guide for those who are aware, / Those with faith in the unseen, who organize the rites of worship, and who spend from what We have provided them.**

If faith by itself meant belief without evidence, then **in the unseen** would be redundant.

Faith on the basis of indisputable evidence – faith that concurs with knowledge, in other words – is still referred to as faith in Q32:28–29:

وَيَقُولُونَ مَتَىٰ هَٰذَا الْفَتْحُ إِن كُنتُمْ صَادِقِينَ  
قُلْ يَوْمَ الْفَتْحِ لَا يَنْفَعُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا إِيمَانُهُمْ وَلَا هُمْ يُنْظَرُونَ

**They say, "When is this victorious disclosure if you have been truthful?" Tell them, "On the day of victory, their faith will not avail the ones who had been in denial, nor will they be given a reprieve."**

The **victorious disclosure** mentioned here is not the conquest of Makkah, but rather Resurrection Day, when all that was hidden becomes manifest. On that Day, everyone has faith ... but for some it comes too late.

فَلَمَّا جَاءَتْهُمْ رُسُلُهُم بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ فَرَحُوا بِمَا عِنْدَهُمْ مِنَ الْعِلْمِ وَحَاقَ بِهِمْ  
 مَا كَانُوا بِهِ يَسْتَهْزِئُونَ  
 فَلَمَّا رَأَوْا بَأْسَنَا قَالُوا آمَنَّا بِاللَّهِ وَكَفَرْنَا بِمَا كُنَّا بِهِ مُشْرِكِينَ  
 فَلَمْ يَكُ يَنْفَعُهُمْ إِيمَانُهُمْ لَمَّا رَأَوْا بَأْسَنَا سِنَّةَ اللَّهِ الَّتِي قَدْ خَلَتْ فِي عِبَادِهِ  
 وَخَسِرَ هُنَالِكَ الْكَافِرُونَ

When their messengers approached them with clear signs, they [the nations of the past] were jubilant about their knowledge, while what they had ridiculed surrounded them. / Then when they saw Our castigation, they said, “We believe in GOD Alone, and we reject the partners we ascribed to Him.” / Their faith, however, did not benefit them when they saw Our castigation; [such is] the normal way of GOD that always comes to pass among His slaves. And there the ones who had denied were lost. (Q40:83–85)

It is easy, too easy, to affirm what is undeniable. There is nothing creative or adventurous about such a faith, which is why on Judgement Day it has no value. And creativity is at the heart of what GOD affirms by being ‘The First Believer.’

When I say, “I believe you,” I am not remarking on the adequacy or inadequacy of my knowledge concerning you. I may not know you at all, or I may be as familiar with you as one human being can be with another. We see couples who have lived together for decades and still cannot trust each other. Rather I am affirming your character or essential nature and my commitment to that. I am constructing a positive image of you in my heart and mind. And so it is with AL-LĀH. He has affirmed our essential value by creating us, by willing us into being. He committed Himself to us with that originating breath of His, even with His Foreknowledge of our transgressions.

ثُمَّ سَوَّاهُ وَنَفَخَ فِيهِ مِنْ رُوحِهِ وَجَعَلَ لَكُمُ السَّمْعَ وَالْأَبْصَارَ وَالْأَفْئِدَةَ  
 قَلِيلًا مَّا تَشْكُرُونَ

Then He proportioned him [the human being] and breathed His Spirit into him, and made for you your hearing, sight, and hearts. How little do you offer thanks! (Q32:9)

(Notice how, with His Spirit’s presence, the indefinite **him** or **it** of general humanity becomes a personal, intelligent, and morally responsible **you**.)

For many of us, faith is merely a navigational aid, a cognitive tool for dealing with a vast and bewildering world. We need it, but we rarely recognize it or give it its due. For AL-LĀH, however, faith is a triumphant celebration of existence in all its glory, a resounding Yes to His Own handiwork: "And God saw every thing that He had made, and, behold, it was very good." (Genesis 1:31) It bears not only the stamp of creation, of factual being, but also of truth or rightness (*al-ḥaqq*), of valued and evaluated being:

وَخَلَقَ اللَّهُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ بِالْحَقِّ وَلِتُجْزَىٰ كُلُّ نَفْسٍ بِمَا كَسَبَتْ  
وَهُمْ لَا يُظْلَمُونَ

**AL-LĀH created both the heavens and the earth with truth, and so that every soul might be requited for what it had earned, and that they not be wronged. (Q45:22)**

The truth here is GOD's Truth – not just the bare knowledge of the reductionists, but also Authenticity that is alive with ethical meaning, purpose, and validity – just so and justly so. When we call something true, we are not only making a statement of fact; we are also assigning a value to it. And for many, especially nowadays, Truth is the highest value of all. No wonder that AL-LĀH says:

فَذَلِكُمْ اللَّهُ رَبُّكُمُ الْحَقُّ فَمَآذَا بَعْدَ الْحَقِّ إِلَّا الضَّلَالُ فَأَنَّا تُصْرِفُونَ

**That is GOD, your Lord, The Truth. And what is there, besides The Truth, except misguidance? How have you been turned away? (Q10:32)**

When AL-LĀH creates, He creates by The Truth, namely by Himself. This act of creation is simultaneously an act of faith, affirming the truth of what He creates. Human faith is likewise creative in its fecundity and variety of expression, relying on experience and imagination as it expands into a domain rich in images and invention – the imaginal world.

By our wants, needs, thoughts, feelings, habits, and actions, each one of us is creating a nebulous facsimile that we call 'the truth,' but which is really the sum total of our contributions to a realm of our own invention by our incessant affirmations of whatever we happen to believe.

يَا أَيُّهَا الْإِنْسَانُ إِنَّكَ كَادِحٌ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ كَدْحًا فَمُلَاقِيهِ

**O human! Truly you are working at a work towards your Lord, and you will meet it. (Q84:6)**

Not one single thwarted desire, highest hope, worst fear, or dream-come-true of ours is lost. Every passing fancy, figure of speech, fictional masterpiece, and epic failure is recorded and stored for its intent and system of implicit values. Over the course of a lifetime, all that we made, obeyed, paid for, and prayed for enters the registry of faith.

وَوُضِعَ الْكِتَابُ فَتَرَى الْمُجْرِمِينَ مُشْفِقِينَ مِمَّا فِيهِ وَيَقُولُونَ يَا وَيْلَتَنَا  
مَا لَ هَذَا الْكِتَابِ لَا يُغَادِرُ صَغِيرَةً وَلَا كَبِيرَةً إِلَّا أَحْصَاهَا وَوَجَدُوا مَا  
عَمِلُوا حَاضِرًا وَلَا يَظْلِمُ رَبُّكَ أَحَدًا

**The Book is laid in place, then you will see the sinners anxious over what there is in it and saying, “Woe to us, what is this book that does not leave a single matter, small or great, uncounted?” Their deeds they find presented, and your Lord does not wrong anyone. (Q18:49)**

Last-minute deletions and corrections are admitted, but actions, as always, speak louder than words. What we think and say about ourselves is only a small part of our final submission, while the makeshift collage that becomes ‘our’ truth – the truth about us, actually – tends to take on a life of its own. Suspended between an unfathomably detailed phenomenal reality (*mulk*) below and an inconceivably intense angelic realm (*malakūt*) above, the twilight world of our creative faith is indeed magical ... until it is dispelled by the Light of a wholly other Day.

No amount of mental effort or introspection can remove the faultiness of what we believe about GOD or any of the realms beyond our ken. We should pray, then, not for impossible accuracy, but for the simple sincerity and faith of the girl in this story:

عَنْ مُعَاوِيَةَ بْنِ الْحَكَمِ قَالَ كَانَتْ لِي جَارِيَةٌ تَرَعَى غَنَمًا لِي قَبْلَ أَحَدٍ  
وَالْجَوَانِيَّةِ فَاطَّلَعْتُ ذَاتَ يَوْمٍ فَإِذَا الذِّئْبُ قَدْ ذَهَبَ بِشَاةٍ مِنْ غَنَمِي وَأَنَا  
رَجُلٌ مِنْ بَنِي آدَمَ آسَفُ كَمَا يَأْسِفُونَ لَكِنْ صَكَّكُنْهَا صَكَّةً فَأَتَيْتُ  
رَسُولَ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ فَعَظَّمْ ذَلِكَ عَلَيَّ قُلْتُ يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ  
أَفَلَا أَعْتَقُهَا قَالَ ائْتِنِي بِهَا فَأَتَيْتُهُ بِهَا فَقَالَ لَهَا أَيْنَ اللَّهُ قَالَتْ فِي السَّمَاءِ  
قَالَ مَنْ أَنَا قَالَتْ أَنْتَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ قَالَ أَعْتَقُهَا فَإِنَّهَا مُؤْمِنَةٌ



*From Mu'āwiyatab-nil-Ḥakam, who said "A slave-girl of mine used to tend my goats near Uḥud and Al-Jawwānīyah. I came upon her and found that a wolf had seized one of our goats. I am a son of Ādam; I get upset like others. So I slapped her. Then I came to the Messenger of GOD (may GOD bless him and give him peace), who thought [my action] was seriously wrong. I asked, 'O Messenger of AL-LĀH, should I set her free?' He replied, 'Bring her to me.' So I brought her to him. He asked her, 'Where is AL-LĀH?' She said, 'In heaven.' He said, 'Who am I?' She replied, 'You are the Messenger of AL-LĀH.' He said, 'Set her free, for she is a believer.'"*

*(Mishkātul-Maṣābīḥ, Book 13, Ḥadīth 217)*

# 13.

## THE PERILS OF FAITH



Given the prevalence and inevitability of faith – we all believe in something – and the likelihood of error in our faith – what we believe is almost certainly a long way from the truth – the bewildered believer will probably just throw up her hands in despair and say, ‘Whatever!’ or ‘Who cares?’ This reaction is, of course, encouraged by atheists who like to point out that if you are guaranteed heaven in one faith you are, by that very choice, destined to hell in all the other faiths. If there are, say, a hundred different faiths available, commitment to any one of them condemns you to perdition in the other ninety-nine. The difference in odds between 99:1 and 100:0 is so small that you might as well abandon the idea of getting the ‘right’ faith altogether and just go with whatever you like.

In recent centuries, the ‘teaching’ of faith in the various traditions, including Islam, has only helped to confirm this distorted and degraded presentation of what faith means. The first step, and the worst, in my opinion, has been to equate faith with religion, as a subject that can be taught. The proliferation of beliefs, sects, and cults has only tended to confirm the sense that faith in its various forms is a commodity that can be marked down and discounted, like brands of cereal arrayed on the supermarket shelves of our mental life. When faith has been trivialized and compartmentalized in this way, is it any wonder that modern ‘consumers’ will ridicule and reject it, or furtively maintain it in a dark cubbyhole of their souls while the public faith in physicalist ‘science’ and economic ‘common sense’ struts around unquestioned?

This can only take place because we have very little conception of what faith means in the Qur’ān, and have repackaged it as a set of propositions or preferences. Faith has been torn out of our hearts and thrown into the streets of polemics and debates. A similar job has been done on God as an idea, a toy for philosophers and undergraduates. At this level, there are lots of things that look more important than ‘God’ or ‘faith.’ But ask today’s atheist debaters what they really care about, what would make

them rejoice or cry to have or to lose. Whatever answer you get, if they are honest, will be their statement of faith, their non-negotiable *ne plus ultra*. There you will come face to face with their god or gods.

Take, for example, the love of one's own children. No atheist concerned with his reputation will easily confess to total unconcern for his children. Even if he had never intended to become attached to them, that core concern will probably strengthen its hold on him over the years, intertwining with his character and becoming an integral part of who he is. He may even be proud to admit that love for his children publicly as proof of his humanity and honour – possibly in a debate to prove that God is not necessary to ensure high moral standards in the world. The faith that he disdains in others has taken that form in him. It has penetrated to the very core of his being, and he would stake his life on it. Or if nothing matters more to him than his own survival, that would be his god. Or maybe, instead, he cares most about his legacy. Then that would be his afterlife, the final affirmation of his *raison d'être*.

The pinnacle of faith is an affirmation of what your life is about, and what would make losing it worthwhile. If the answer is 'nothing,' then it is your life and nothing more that is the ultimate object of your faith. At this level of importance, there is no facile faith switching or modern belief shopping. When we talk about faith in its highest form, we are talking about your essential values, who you essentially are, and whom you take to be the ultimate authority, be it yourself or some other god or God. No wonder, then, that in the Qur'an the discovery of faith is often portrayed in terms that are sudden, visceral, and unarguable.

وَإِذَا سَمِعُوا مَا أُنْزِلَ إِلَى الرَّسُولِ تَرَىٰ أَعْيُنُهُمْ تَفِيضُ مِنَ الدَّمْعِ مِمَّا عَرَفُوا مِنَ الْحَقِّ يَقُولُونَ رَبَّنَا آمَنَّا فَاكْتُبْنَا مَعَ الشَّاهِدِينَ

And when they hear what was revealed to the Messenger, you see their eyes aflow with tears from what they recognize as Truth, and they exclaim, "Our Lord, we do believe, so enter us among the witnesses!" (Q5:83)

قُلْ آمِنُوا بِهِ أَوْ لَا تُؤْمِنُوا إِنَّ الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْعِلْمَ مِنْ قَبْلِهِ إِذَا يُتْلَىٰ عَلَيْهِمْ يَخِرُّونَ لِلْأَذْقَانِ سُجَّدًا

Say, "Believe in it, or give no credence. Truly those imbued with knowledge previous to it, when it was read to them, would fall upon their faces in prostration." (Q17:107)

Such a reaction is not confined to human beings. The *jinn* (genies) respond to Guidance when it is recited to them (Q72:13), and even the customary order of the cosmos is thrown into confusion when the Truth in its dreadful entirety is unleashed, as in Q81:1–14, Q84:1–5, and the following verse:

لَوْ أَنزَلْنَاهَا هَذَا الْقُرْآنَ عَلَىٰ جَبَلٍ لَّرَأَيْنَهُ خَاشِعًا مُّتَصَدِّعًا مِّنْ خَشْيَةِ اللَّهِ

**If We had sent down this Qur’ān upon a mountain, you would see it humbled and in pieces from the fear of GOD. (Q59:21)**

The physical response, be it tears, prostration, or disintegration, is only a sign of the respondent’s internal state – a combination of enlightenment, awe, and anguish. The mind, however well prepared, is swept away, as a dam would be by a deluge it was never designed to hold. The inner transformation is so overwhelming that it must be expressed, like a river overflowing its banks. This natural reaction to The Truth, however, can easily be diverted, simulated, softened, or reinterpreted by Satan – hence the title of this Chapter, ‘The Perils of Faith.’

Faith is the spark that leaps the gap from what is partially real to what the believer deems to be more or completely real. The believers commonly referred to in the Qur’ān are those who cultivate this spark and train it to leap towards GOD. They recognize in doing so that they are falling short, so they keep struggling with their faith. Polytheists, idolaters, and hypocrites – the vast majority of humanity – are also engaged in acts of faith. But the conclusions that they leap to are not GOD The Absolute All, The One Truth; rather they are semblances and shadows, combinations of lesser absolutes that have won the people’s credence by various tricks of poor lighting and false promises.<sup>P</sup> It is these artificial substitutes – corrupted versions they defend as satisfactory and final – that comprise the ugly side of faith condemned by today’s atheist writers and speakers.

The meeting of our finite with The Infinite, of our shadowy, evasive self with the blazing, uncompromising Light, is sure to be agonizing and

**P**

The reader should remember, once again, that evil and falsehood are not existents or real things, but the absences or gaps that faith has to leap past in pursuit of the Truth Beyond. Satan has been granted the power to conjure up simulacra out of this void that appease the ego’s need for easy terms and shortcuts – a spiritual equivalent of fast food.

unsustainable except for the briefest of glimpses. Even at partial intensities, as we see from the verses above, such encounters result in fear, tears, trembling, and other involuntary bodily reactions. However much we may desire to believe, few of us can handle ‘the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth’ for extended periods without some sort of shade, like the tinted spectacles I wear to protect my eyes from sunlight. Honest admission of this shortcoming in us renders it forgivable, another item in the list of sins that we pray will be erased from our record on the Day of Judgement. But even that admission, and that prospect of a Judgement they cannot control, is too uncomfortable for some. Satan, meanwhile, offers a number of cheap substitutes – ‘real’ bargains for those who think they can settle for any ‘truth’ in place of Truth.

عَنْ جَابِرٍ قَالَ قَالَ النَّبِيُّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ إِنَّ الشَّيْطَانَ قَدْ يَيْسُ أَنْ يَعْبُدَهُ الْمُصَلُّونَ وَلَكِنْ فِي التَّحْرِيشِ بَيْنَهُمْ

*From Jābir, who said that the Prophet (may GOD bless him and give him peace) said, “Verily Satan has no hope of being worshipped by those who perform the ritual prayer, but [does have hope] in causing discord among them.”*

*(Jāmi’ut-Tirmidhī, Book 40, Ḥadīth 37)*

وَلَا يَجْرِمَنَّكُمْ شَنَاَنُ قَوْمٍ أَنْ صَدُّوكُمْ عَنِ الْمَسْجِدِ الْحَرَامِ أَنْ تَعْتَدُوا  
وَتَعَاوَنُوا عَلَى الْبِرِّ وَالتَّقْوَىٰ وَلَا تَعَاوَنُوا عَلَى الْإِثْمِ وَالْعُدْوَانِ

**And do not let your hatred of a people who prevented you from [going to] the Sacred Mosque make you transgress. Aid one another in uprightness and devoutness; aid not one another in wrongdoing nor in enmity. (Q5:2)**

How can destructive, satanic feelings such as anger and loathing find a home in the hearts of believers? All impaired or unholy (not whole) forms of faith are experienced as insecure, and expressed in some kind of warped behaviour, such as wrongdoing and enmity. Faith in GOD is serene and whole because it works from an awareness that only nothing can hinder it. One who has seen the nothingness of nothing is secure in her faith. She realizes that GOD The Omnipotent will not let anything real stand between her and GOD. With that realization, she experiences the beauty of an unconditional trust in The Unconditioned Absolute, and of His Love and Trust in us.

But those who believe in the reality of obstacles to faith and doubt GOD’s Power and Desire to remove them will nourish hatred in their

hearts towards those illusory obstacles. In the verse above, those obstacles appeared to them as human enemies – the leaders of Makkah and their followers who harassed and fought the Muslims prior to its conquest. Hatred of ensouled creatures of GOD like us, still capable of virtue and piety, is like harbouring hell in our heart, and virtually always repels those who could have found through us the higher absolutes that they too seek. Aggression, bigotry, and other diseases of the heart are by-products of a deficiency of faith combined with a desperate, unrecognized need for quick and concrete solutions.<sup>Q</sup>

### Q

There is a cogent Islamic objection to this diatribe against hatred (*bughḍ* in Arabic), namely that GOD Himself curses, dislikes, and does not love the unbelievers, and that there are certain things He has made loathsome for us – **rejection, sin, and disobedience (Q49:7)**. In other words, the right kind of hatred – loving the sinner, but hating the sin – can be an essential part of our faith.

I note, however, that there are five references to *bughḍ* in the Qur’ān, and four of them are decidedly negative. The only remotely positive one is in a speech by Ibrāhīm (peace be upon him), in which he accepts that **lasting enmity and hatred have parted us and you (Q60:4)**. The wording describes a mournful admission rather than the kind of vehement fury we normally associate with hatred today. And as **Q5:2** indicates, bad feelings that smolder in the heart should never lead to transgression or wrongdoing. Letting our hatred loose to run amok like a mad dog is absolutely forbidden.

As for “harbouring hell in our heart,” I discuss at length, in Chapter 17, why GOD harbours Hell in His Kingdom of the Real. He is, after all, The Creator of fire and The Lord of darkness as well as light; Hell is part of the Divine Ecology. Righteous anger and hatred of injustice can be vital elements in our own kingdom of the spirit ... when properly controlled.

We see this foolish impatience in people’s attitudes to those who are different from us – foreigners, other races, adherents of other belief systems, and so on. ‘If only’ they were gone from our lives, from our community, from our nation, or from the world, ‘our faith’ would be accomplished and whole. They fail to see that a faith with such conditions is not a faith in GOD, but in a (lesser) God denied to us by those conditions. But GOD in His True Glory is undeniable.

A common pitfall among the ‘People of the Book’ (Jews, Christians, and Muslims in particular) is to think that when a scripture or religion is declared by God to be true, everything else automatically becomes false.

وَقَالَتِ الْيَهُودُ لَيْسَتْ النَّصَارَى عَلَى شَيْءٍ وَقَالَتِ النَّصَارَى لَيْسَتْ  
الْيَهُودُ عَلَى شَيْءٍ وَهُمْ يَتْلُونَ الْكِتَابَ كَذَلِكَ قَالَ الَّذِينَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ مِثْلَ  
قَوْلِهِمْ فَاللَّهُ يَحْكُمُ بَيْنَهُمْ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ فِيمَا كَانُوا فِيهِ يَخْتَلِفُونَ

The Jews declare, “The Christians have not anything [worthwhile],” and the Christians say, “The Jews do not have anything [worthwhile],” and they [both] recite the Book. Thus say those who do not know, like what they say. But GOD will judge between them on the Day of Resurrection in what they had been disputing. (Q2:113)

Truth for them is like the contents of a box or the pages between the covers of a book, even though the Qur’ān itself (Q7:157), like the scriptures before it (Q5:44 and 5:46), is described as Light, which is by nature expansive and boundless. Their thinking is that ‘If I have it (and I do), then you don’t.’ This zero-sum mentality reduces the Truth to a commodity, a thing with physical properties, rather than the Spirit underlying the sentence so often repeated, **AL-LĀH created both the heavens and the earth with Truth.** (Q45:22)

قُلْ لَوْ كَانَ الْبَحْرُ مَدَادًا لِكَلِمَاتِ رَبِّي لَنَفِدَ الْبَحْرُ قَبْلَ أَنْ تَنفَدَ كَلِمَاتُ  
رَبِّي وَلَوْ جِئْنَا بِمِثْلِهِ مَدَدًا

Say, “If the sea were ink with [which to write] my Master’s words, the sea would be consumed before my Master’s words were finished, even if we brought another one to supplement it.” (Q18:109)

The words of GOD are limitless. They may be concentrated in certain books or persons or ways of life, but are never contained by them. **Which-ever way you turn – there! The Face of GOD.** (Q2:115)

عَنْ أَبِي بِنِ كَعْبٍ أَنَّ النَّبِيَّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ قَالَ إِنَّ مِنَ الشِّعْرِ  
حِكْمَةً

*From Ubayyib-ni Ka’b, [who said] that the Prophet (may GOD bless him and give him peace) said, “Verily in poetry there is wisdom.”*

*(Sunanu Abī Dāwūd, Book 43, Ḥadīth 238)*

This does not mean that everything written is true, just as we find it.

But it also does not allow us to dismiss a speech or a book or a genre in its entirety because it contains mistakes. Rather, in the same way as light appears in various forms and intensities with whatever is visible, and yet is not identical with that object, so is truth detectable in everything that GOD creates ... including Satan. Wisdom enables us to see and acknowledge reality wherever we meet it, even in the lowest and meanest objects. We do not throw money away because a twenty-five-cent coin is tarnished or a hundred-dollar bill is slightly torn. Nor should we reject a word of truth on the tongue of an atheist or in the book of an opponent because of how we view the speaker or due to the errors written down beside that truth. True insight enables us to distinguish between truth and falsehood proficiently, not carelessly and wholesale, such as by saying, “They **do not have anything [worthwhile].**”

Without the creative power of Truth, nothing made by GOD could subsist for even an instant. And that means faith in GOD must be as sensitive to all forms where His Light is manifest to our spiritual gaze in the same way as our pupils open wider and take in more light the darker our surroundings become.

ذَلِكَ بِأَنَّ اللَّهَ يُوَلِّجُ اللَّيْلَ فِي النَّهَارِ وَيُوَلِّجُ النَّهَارَ فِي اللَّيْلِ وَأَنَّ اللَّهَ سَمِيعٌ بَصِيرٌ

**That is because AL-LĀH indeed interpolates the night into the day and intromits the day into the night, and verily AL-LĀH is Hearing, Seeing. (Q22:61)**

Faith that fails to see The Light wherever and however it appears is, at the very least, impaired. In terms of spiritual vision, such blindness can lead to bigotry, fanaticism, and a habit of associating GOD with what we alone possess.

وَيَوْمَ نَحْشُرُهُمْ جَمِيعًا ثُمَّ نَقُولُ لِلَّذِينَ أَشْرَكُوا أَيْنَ شُرَكَاؤُكُمُ الَّذِينَ كُنْتُمْ تَزْعُمُونَ  
ثُمَّ لَمْ تَكُنْ فِتْنَتُهُمْ إِلَّا أَنْ قَالُوا وَاللَّهِ رَبَّنَا مَا كُنَّا مُشْرِكِينَ  
انْظُرْ كَيْفَ كَذَبُوا عَلَى أَنْفُسِهِمْ وَضَلَّ عَنْهُمْ مَا كَانُوا يَفْتَرُونَ

**On the day We gather all of them, then say to those who made associates [with Us], “Where are your confederates that you alleged?” / Then they will have no guile [left] except to say, “By God, our Lord, we never were associators.” / Look at how they lie about themselves, and gone from them is what they used to fabricate. (Q6:22–24)**



Faith in One God is more than just a matter of claiming to be a monotheist. How many are the Jews, Christians, and Muslims who have turned their particular religion into a members-only club for God! They forget that He is The Creator and Sustainer of every single human being, and that each soul is directly and constantly linked to Him, regardless of his or her faith (which is why denial – *kufr* – is so immensely and immediately hazardous for every single soul). Forgetting this universal presence of The Divine, they recreate Him in the image of their own narrow ethnic or cultural community. In other words, they associate GOD with themselves and their badges of belonging. (How often have I heard preachers thoughtlessly spouting in their sermons, ‘Islam says ...’ or ‘Christianity requires us ...’!) Islam in the Qur’ān means submission to GOD; it is not the same as the racial and cultural brands or interest groups so casually assumed today.

The verses above warn us of the fate of pseudo-monotheists ... and they are legion. Consider the billions of Christians who claim to be monotheists and yet believe in the Trinity. What about the billions of Muslims whose blood boils at foreigners’ denigration of the Prophet, the Companions, or this or that saint or scholar, but who have no emotion left for The Lord Who is flouted, evaded, or ignored in a thousand different ways in their own countries? And then we have millions of Jews who believe that God can only be found within the confines of one special race or land. Of all of these, and many more – the vast majority of mankind, in fact – it can be said,

مَا قَدَرُوا اللَّهَ حَقَّ قَدْرِهِ

**They have not valued GOD at His true value. (Q22:74)**

And to believers of all stripes who think they are safe by virtue of their birth or by claims based on identity alone, I say “Think again”:

عَنْ قَتِيلَةٍ أَمْرَأَةٍ مِنْ جُهَيْنَةَ أَنَّ يَهُودِيًّا أَتَى النَّبِيَّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ فَقَالَ إِنَّكُمْ تَنْدِدُونَ وَإِنَّكُمْ تُشْرِكُونَ تَقُولُونَ مَا شَاءَ اللَّهُ وَشِئْتُمْ وَتَقُولُونَ وَالْكَعْبَةِ فَأَمَرَ هُمُ النَّبِيُّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ إِذَا أَرَادُوا أَنْ يَحْلِفُوا أَنْ يَقُولُوا وَرَبِّ الْكَعْبَةِ وَيَقُولُونَ مَا شَاءَ اللَّهُ ثُمَّ شِئْتُمْ

*From Qutailah, a woman from Juhainah, [it is reported] that a Jew came to the Prophet (may GOD bless him and give him peace) and said, “Indeed you [Muslims] are attributing rivals [to GOD] and indeed you are ascribing partners [to GOD]. You say, ‘What AL-LĀH wills and what you will,’ and you say ‘[I swear] by the Ka’bah.’” So the Prophet (may GOD bless him and give him peace) ordered them to say when they swear, “By The Lord of the Ka’bah” and to say “What AL-LĀH wills, then what you will.”*

*(Sunanun-Nasā’ī, Book 35, Ḥadīth 13)*

From this tradition, we learn that (1) habits of speech need to be corrected to avoid accusations of association (*shirk*), that (2) even the Prophet (may GOD bless him and give him peace) could accept a reprimand from GOD, on the tongue of someone not identified as a Muslim, and correct his course accordingly, that (3) monotheists may only make GOD the subject of their oaths, and that (4) there is only One Will, and all other wills must be regarded as subordinate and subsequent to His.

In the same way as our individual wills are more or less in accordance with the One Will of GOD, so are individuals’ versions of faith more or less authentic affirmations of faith in GOD, even when He is explicitly denied. In affirming anything, as we humans cannot help but do, we are affirming as absolute a shadow or reflection of the Glory that pervades the universe of values and ideals emanating from Him. The more reasons we have for rejecting God, or believing in something that appears to us as other than Him, the greater we demonstrate our trust in Reason, a divine trait derived from His Unicity. Ultimately, humanity is one, and its faith, however refracted, is in the end only a mirror of its Final Object. The very strength of our denial, however perilous it may be for us as individuals, only serves to strengthen our inevitable realization that Faith, too, is One.

## 14.

# FREEDOM, FATE, AND FLOW



Being free, as in ‘free will,’ is undoubtedly an absolute, one of those irresistible ideals we are so eager to attribute to ourselves. Indeed, one of GOD’s Names, Al-Ghanī, can be translated as The Wealthy, The Independent, or The Free (from want). Invoking freedom, therefore, reverberates in our souls like something divine, which ultimately it is. The uncanny feeling we have that our acts are freely chosen – that the proof of our having free will is as obvious as moving, or not moving, a finger when we intend to – may actually be an immediate echo of GOD’s work inside us. It is as if we are constantly being reminded, through our illusion of self-governance, of how it feels to be GOD.

Why do I say “illusion”? To start with, no one but GOD can claim this degree of liberty:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَفْعَلُ مَا يُرِيدُ

**Verily AL-LĀH performs what He desires. (Q22:14)**

We cannot, even if we wanted to, alter the basic constitution of the universe, the simple facts of life that provide a stable environment and keep us dependent on air, liquids, energy, and nourishment, or the composition and functioning of our bodies. We may be able to ruin the surface of the planet, and we can commit suicide individually as well, but in both cases not without the help of particular materials and laws of nature. We can improve our physical health, but only marginally and temporarily, and work on our character and attitudes to a certain extent, but even replacing one mental habit with another or changing one memory for another is usually beyond our capabilities. If we are honest with ourselves, we will admit that though there are a million things we could do differently, that range does not begin to even scratch the surface of absolute freedom. Nothing in this universe is absolutely free, (i.e., uncaused), unless it is an expression of The Uncaused Cause, or GOD.

Whatever we do, our work is cut out for us from His Infinitely Powerful One Will:

وَمَا تَشَاءُونَ إِلَّا أَنْ يَشَاءَ اللَّهُ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ عَلِيمًا حَكِيمًا

**You do not will except AL-LĀH has willed it. Truly GOD has ever been Cognizant, Wise. (Q76:30)**

وَمَا تَشَاءُونَ إِلَّا أَنْ يَشَاءَ اللَّهُ رَبُّ الْعَالَمِينَ

**You do not will except AL-LĀH, The Master of the worlds, has willed it. (Q81:29)**

In other words, the Will of GOD precedes and subsumes all other wills, just as a general ‘What Happens’ includes every individual happening. There is no conflict, no clash of wills between GOD and man, no more than between the flow of history and one person’s life course, or between the sum of all knowledge and what is known individually by me, or between your particular love and the Divine Love that animates the universe.

وَإِذْ قُلْنَا لَكَ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ أَحَاطَ بِالنَّاسِ

**And [remember] when We said to you, “Indeed your Lord encompasses mankind.” (Q17:60)**

Insofar as what we do feels like freedom, like one of the million things we could have done differently, we deem ourselves free. Just like our relative knowledge and our relative love, borrowed from GOD The Absolutely Knowing and Absolutely Loving, our relative freedom is borrowed from Him, based on our feeling it, confirmed by our faith in it, and helping us to act as if it were absolute. Yet all our acts fit snugly within the flow of destiny, which appears to us as GOD’s irrevocable decree with the benefit of hindsight. From GOD’s vantage point, however, it is all one happening, a singular Being Here and Now:

إِنَّمَا أَمْرُهُ إِذَا أَرَادَ شَيْئًا أَنْ يَقُولَ لَهُ كُنْ فَيَكُونُ

**Truly His Affair is that when He intends a thing He tells it “Be!” and so it is. (Q36:82)**

Athletes, artists, and mystics yearn to participate in this Divine Freedom, and occasionally get a taste of it. Nowadays we call it ‘flow’ or ‘in the zone’ – a state of action or awareness through us but not altogether by

us, at a level clearly beyond our ordinary capabilities and sense of control. AL-LĀH describes it this way:

لَهُمْ مَا يَشَاءُونَ عِنْدَ رَبِّهِمْ ذَلِكَ جَزَاءُ الْمُحْسِنِينَ

**Theirs is what they will together with their Master. That is the reward of those who do their best. (Q39:34)**

When believers are doing their best, the Divine Will ‘takes over’ their actions:

قُلْ تَقَاتِلُوا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ وَلِكِنَّ اللَّهَ يَفْعَلُ مَا يُنَاصِرُ وَلَكِنَّ اللَّهَ قَتَلَهُمْ وَمَا رَمَيْتُمْ إِذْ رَمَيْتُمْ وَلَكِنَّ اللَّهَ رَمَى

**You [Muslims] did not slay them, but it was AL-LĀH who slew them, nor did you [Muḥammad] throw when you did throw, but rather it was GOD Who threw. (Q8:17)**

There is nothing forced or robotic about this sense of destiny at work. Rather, as reported by those who have experienced it (including myself), it feels as if a great stillness has descended upon the intensity of one’s actions, slowing time and imparting an amazing sense of vitality and peace.

هُوَ الَّذِي أَنْزَلَ السَّكِينَةَ فِي قُلُوبِ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ لِيَزْدَادُوا إِيمَانًا مَعَ إِيمَانِهِمْ

**He is the One Who made tranquillity descend into the hearts of the believers so that they might gain in faith besides their faith. (Q48:4)**

In this state of ecstatic dynamism, it would be absurd to insist on or even think of one’s individuality and independence; that is the last thing one wants. One wants this seamless interplay between the mortal and the ineffable to go on indefinitely. It cannot last, of course; it fades and dies, and later one wonders how one could have ever tasted it. It was not summoned as a genie by the spell of a magician; no, it came unbidden, as if to say, ‘This power is not yours, but try it on for size anyway. This is a foretaste of things beyond your ken.’

We see this again in the anecdote concerning the **servant from among Our servants (Q18:65)**, usually identified in commentaries as Khidr, whom Mūsā (peace be upon him) was directed to follow in the hope of learning what his Lord had taught him. From the very start, Khidr could see that Mūsā would not be able to ‘follow’ the paradoxical flow of Omniscience untangling the knots that baffle most of us most of the time. Of course, the whole point of his three lessons is that it is nothing but our

ignorance, and our ignorance of that ignorance, that deny us guidance and tighten those knots of pain and failure. Throughout these demonstrations, Khidr is not a zombie mindlessly operating on a remote signal; he is living in the moment, acting calmly and decisively, and totally aware of what he is doing. And at the end, he simply says, **I did not do it on my own. (Q18:82).** Yet he had done what he wanted ... because he wanted nothing more than to do the Will of GOD.

This story was retold by the Prophet (may GOD bless him and give him peace), and evidently he enjoyed the ‘flow’ of it so much as to say (in *Jāmi’it-Tirmidhī, Book 47, Ḥadīth 3442*):

يَرْحَمُ اللَّهُ مُوسَىٰ لَوَدِدْنَا أَنَّهُ كَانَ صَبَرَ حَتَّى يَقُصَّ عَلَيْنَا مِنْ  
أَخْبَارِهِمَا

*May AL-LĀH have mercy on Mūsā! We wished he had been patient until He could tell us [more] about their story.*

As revelations such as these are unravelled to us, the production (*ījād*) of a higher plane of being (*wujūd*) is attended with the ardour (*wajd*) of love and ecstasy (*wijdān*). All four words in Arabic are derived from the same triadic root of *w – j – d* (*waw – jīm – dāl*). The basic meaning behind them is ‘finding.’ It is not something we produce or invent, like an art object; rather it is the stuff of the universe, already there, alive and waiting, found in whatever we do when we do it beautifully. Our lives, once we have tasted it, are constantly circling back in search of it, like something lost within the shadows of our selves.

Alive to the potential of this **tremendous victory**, we need only enough freedom to pursue it. Or Freedom comes of its own accord, pursuing us.

إِنَّ هَذَا لَهُوَ الْفَوْزُ الْعَظِيمُ  
لِمِثْلِ هَذَا فَلْيَعْمَلِ الْعَامِلُونَ

**Truly this is the tremendous victory. / For what is similar to this let doers do their deeds. (Q37:60–61)**

If any freedom can be said to be our right, this is it – the freedom to act as one with GOD. For this the early Muslims fought and died, and for this the ardent faithful have sacrificed their all in every age.

But without faith in this One Will, What Happens is experienced as inscrutable, foreign, and intrusive, as fate. Under fate, we are no longer

finding GOD's Will, nor even seeking to rediscover it, but simply asserting our independence from it. Freedom has become not what we need to return to GOD, but what we claim as ours that we may turn away from Him. As our choices open up to the ever-growing world of our desires and start to feel arbitrary and uninformed by any higher purposes, we need to consult with the one who first sought freedom for its own sake – Iblīs (Chapter 7). It is he who will tell us that our freedom is not in the service of knowledge, whose ultimate source is GOD, but for the sake of power, which we must wrest from Him. And we have a reason for doing so.

The standard objection to the supremacy of GOD's Will is that it transforms us into puppets or robots and thus negates accountability for our actions. Since moral responsibility is an indispensable foundation of civilization, how can we maintain human freedom and continue to believe in God's sovereignty? How can we be held to account on the Day of Judgment if we are not independent, the rightful owners and ultimate causes of our acts?

In the Western tradition, belief in free will has taken root mainly because there seems to be no credible response to this rhetorical question. Most philosophers and theologians go to great lengths to show how God's omnipotence and/or omniscience are compatible, or incompatible, with human free will, which is a 'given.' The case appears closed, and even Islamic scholars seem largely convinced that 'free will' is absolutely necessary as a pillar of law and morality.<sup>R</sup>

#### R

The judicial term for someone who is legally responsible is *'āqil bāligh*, meaning 'intelligent [and] adult.' 'Adult' refers to one's biological maturity, since *bāligh* means to have arrived (i.e., at puberty). *'Āqil* means 'rational' or 'capable of telling right from wrong,' hence intellectually mature. Having a will or a free will is not up for discussion. Anyone with young children can attest that they have an abundance of 'free' will, but that does not in any sense make them responsible individuals.

But in the Qur'ān, 'will' as a noun does not appear. How strange it is that something thought to be so essential to morality and law is not even given the minimal recognition of its own noun in Scripture! One word that approximates our notion of will, namely choice, does make two entries in the Qur'ān – fatefully so:

وَمَا كَانَ لِمُؤْمِنٍ وَلَا مُؤْمِنَةٍ إِذَا قَضَى اللَّهُ وَرَسُولُهُ أَمْرًا أَنْ يَكُونَ لَهُمُ الْخِيَرَةُ مِنْ أَمْرِهِمْ وَمَنْ يَعْصِ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ فَقَدْ ضَلَّ ضَلَالًا مُبِينًا

**It is not right that a believing man or woman have a choice in something if AL-LĀH and His Apostle have decided it for them. Whoever disobeys AL-LĀH and His Apostle has quite clearly gone astray. (Q33:36)**

وَرَبُّكَ يَخْلُقُ مَا يَشَاءُ وَيَخْتَارُ مَا كَانَ لَهُمُ الْخِيَرَةُ سُبْحَانَ اللَّهِ وَتَعَالَى عَمَّا يُشْرِكُونَ

**And what your Master wills and chooses He creates; it was not theirs by right to choose. Transcendent is AL-LĀH and High Beyond what they associate [with Him]! (Q28:68)**

We have in these two verses the outlines of a demarcation between human freedom and Absolute Freedom. In the former verse, **qaḍā (decided)** refers to religious law and obligation – the realm of **amr** (command) in which believers are expected to accept the Authority of GOD and His Messenger, but where disobedience is a possibility. In the latter verse, however, the key word is **yakhluq (creates)**. This is the realm of *khalq* (creation) or *qadr* (power) where reality in the form of hard facts prevails. The hardest fact of all is that nothing happens except What Happens – in other words, Divine Predestination.

So how is disobedience even a possibility, if GOD's Power is absolute? The wording of **it was not theirs by right to choose** provides the key. Many translators render this as "they have no choice," but this is not accurate. In both verses the phrase **mā kāna li (mu'min) / mā kāna la (hum)** expresses not an impossibility, like "never" in English, but rather moral disapproval, or **not by right**. Both verses use **choice** to describe a disposition, an attitude, or a perspective rather than an act. Just as believers should not choose other than as **GOD and His Messenger have decided**, so also people in general should not choose other than **what your Master wills and chooses**. In the first case, someone could choose otherwise (and perhaps lose the designation of **believing man or woman**), and in the second case, someone could also choose otherwise, by disagreeing with GOD's decree, prompting the exclamation of **Transcendent is AL-LĀH and High Beyond what they associate!** What are they associating? Their choice of something else with His choice of what actually is.



By shifting the focus of our freedom from what we effect or cause to what we choose or intend, the Qur'ān is helping us to reconcile our demand that humans be morally responsible with our sense that a God Whose Power is limited by anything is not worthy of the name of GOD. AL-LĀH must be Absolutely Free of any limit, and yet human law, ethics, and mental health are insistent that to be a mature, rational human being is to have a strong instinct of moral accountability. But what is it that is actually held to account?

How can our acts be blamed if, as GOD says, **And GOD created you and what you do (Q37:96)**? Or how can our will be faulted if, as GOD says, **You do not will except AL-LĀH has willed it (Q76:30)**? There is something else in play, however, that does require GOD's Judgement – our judgement.

قُلْ هَلْ نُنَبِّئُكُمْ بِالْأَخْسَرِينَ أَعْمَالًا  
الَّذِينَ ضَلَّ سَعْيُهُمْ فِي الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا وَهُمْ يَحْسَبُونَ أَنَّهُمْ يُحْسِنُونَ  
صُنْعًا

Say, “Shall we inform you of the greatest losers in their deeds? / Those whose striving went astray in worldly life, and yet they thought that truly they were doing good.” (Q18:103–104)

أَمْ حَسِبَ الَّذِينَ اجْتَرَحُوا السَّيِّئَاتِ أَن نَّجْعَلَهُمْ كَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا  
الصَّالِحَاتِ سَوَاءً مَحْيَاهُمْ وَمَمَاتُهُمْ سَاءَ مَا يَحْكُمُونَ

Do those who perpetrated evil deeds consider We will make them equal in their life and death to those with faith who did good deeds? How badly do they judge! (Q45:21)

If we judge ourselves to be subservient to GOD's Will, and verify that judgement by acting accordingly, we have, however imperfectly, sought refuge with AL-LĀH from our errors and sins. We may even be able, like Khidr, to do what might appear to others to be crimes or mistakes, but **I did not do it on my own** would apply, and those actions would gain His Mercy instead. Ultimately it is our judgement, or intention, not our acts, that earn GOD's approval or censure. (See Text Box NN in Chapter 33 in which this foundation of Qu'rānic morality is contrasted with utilitarianism.) This is confirmed by the centrepiece of Islamic law and the first *hadīth* that new students of Islam are likely to read:

عَنْ أَمِيرِ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ أَبِي حَفْصٍ عُمَرَ بْنِ الْخَطَّابِ رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُ قَالَ  
 سَمِعْتُ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ يَقُولُ إِنَّمَا الْأَعْمَالُ بِالنِّيَّاتِ  
 وَإِنَّمَا لِكُلِّ امْرِئٍ مَا نَوَى

*From the Commander of the Believers, Abī Ḥafṣin ‘Umarab-nīl-Khaṭṭābi (may GOD be pleased with him), who said, “I heard the Messenger of AL-LĀH (may GOD bless him and give him peace) say, ‘Actions are only [judged] by intentions, and for every man is only what he intended.’”*

*(Ḥadīth 1, 40 Ḥadīth an-Nawawī)*

If we judge ourselves to be free, we will be judged as free beings, fully responsible for our acts. We cannot foist our crimes on GOD, as we never intended to submit ourselves to Him.<sup>8</sup> Believing ourselves to be completely free, or acting as if we are, we throw out His Mercy that normally accompanies His Judgement, and have nothing to turn to in the end but an impersonal book where **their deeds they find presented (Q18:49)**. As ‘Īsā (peace be upon him) is quoted as saying in the New Testament: “For with whatever judgement you judge, you will be judged; and with whatever measure you measure, it will be measured to you.” (Matthew 7:2)

### S

How does an individual’s freedom of will coincide with GOD’s Omnipotence? – simply by referring to two different levels of reality, the relative and the absolute. If you think you are free to choose, you are operating in the realm of relativity, where such choices are relatively real. If you believe that GOD controls all you do, then you no longer choose to be free of GOD, but rather acquiesce in being free with GOD. Absolute free will is an illusion, but you will be judged on the strength of your illusions and held accountable to your own standards. You cannot live your life carelessly and then claim to be subjected to GOD’s Will and thus free of blame. You enjoyed your illusion of freedom; now be judged by it.

The only autonomy we have – and yet that which is seemingly infinite in scope – is the freedom of our own minds. There we can experience one of three forms of freedom – GOD’s own Freedom, which initially feels like constraint until we actually want what is right; the freedom of illusion, which initially feels like true liberty until we realize how compelling lies become; or one more, namely a nebulous zone of indeterminacy between truth and illusion where most of us spend most of our lives.

مُذَبِّبِينَ بَيْنَ ذَلِكَ لَا إِلَى هُوَ لَا إِلَى هُوَ لَا وَمَنْ يُضِلِلِ اللَّهُ فَلَنْ  
تَجِدَ لَهُ سَبِيلًا

**Vacillating back and forth, without committing to the one or to the other. He whom GOD misguides, you will not find for him a way. (Q4:143)**

In these latter two states we are free to pass judgement on anything, including the very existence of GOD. There (but actually nearer than our ‘here’), and very soon (but actually sooner than we think), GOD is Free to judge ... us.

Of course, even in the imaginal world of our own minds, our freedom is only relative, and certainly not absolute. Our powers of thought and imagination are limited in many ways, including how much and how well we can remember things, our experiences, which are usually and almost entirely the products of our specific time and place, our character, which predisposes us to certain types of thoughts and feelings, and our beliefs regarding what is true, what is false, what is interesting, and what is worth sharing with others.

It is this vast power of conception that distinguishes us from the angels and virtually explains why Ādam, so early in the Qur’ān, is entitled the deputy (*khalīfah*) of AL-LĀH. (See Chapters 43 and 44 for a more detailed exposition of this momentous Divine assignment.)

وَعَلَّمَ آدَمَ الْأَسْمَاءَ كُلَّهَا ثُمَّ عَرَضَهُمْ عَلَى الْمَلَائِكَةِ فَقَالَ أَنْبِئُونِي بِأَسْمَاءِ هَؤُلَاءِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ قَالُوا سُبْحَانَكَ لَا عِلْمَ لَنَا إِلَّا مَا عَلَّمْتَنَا إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ الْعَلِيمُ الْحَكِيمُ  
قَالَ يَا آدَمُ أَنْبِئْهُمْ بِأَسْمَائِهِمْ فَلَمَّا أَنْبَأَهُمْ بِأَسْمَائِهِمْ قَالَ أَلَمْ أَقُلْ لَكُمْ إِنِّي  
أَعْلَمُ غَيْبَ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَأَعْلَمُ مَا تُبْدُونَ وَمَا كُنْتُمْ تَكْتُمُونَ

**And He taught Ādam all the names and showed them to the angels, saying “Tell me what the names of these things are if you have been truthful.” / They replied, “Transcendentally Sublime are You; we have no knowledge other than what You have taught us. Verily You are The Knowing, Wise.” / “O Ādam,” He pronounced, “Inform them what their names are.” Then when he apprised them of their names, He said, “Did I not say to you that verily I know the secret of the heavens and the earth? I know what you disclose and what you have been hiding.” (Q2:31–33)**

What we have from GOD, therefore, is not so much free will as free belief. We are free to fall into the uncreated realm of our very own illusions and name things and characters and make up stories any way we want, which of course is what fantasy and science fictions writers specialize in and what all of us indulge in to a certain extent. GOD Himself makes this clear.

إِنْ هِيَ إِلَّا أَسْمَاءٌ سَمَّيْتُمُوهَا أَنْتُمْ وَأَبَاؤُكُمْ مَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ بِهَا مِنْ سُلْطَانٍ إِنْ يَتَّبِعُونَ إِلَّا الظَّنَّ وَمَا تَهْوَى الْأَنْفُسُ

**They are nought but names that you and your forefathers named, for which AL-LĀH has not revealed any imprimatur. They follow nothing but conjecture and what they desire for themselves. (Q53:23)**

Notice that what the fabricators think, what they follow, and what they want are twice dismissed as **nought** and **nothing**. This is the same void, you may recall, that I discussed earlier in Chapter 7 in reference to Satan and his expulsion from reality into a temporary realm where he is free to invent – not create – evil. This domain of illusions imitates reality through ‘what if’ scenarios and fictional assumptions, referred to in this tradition:

عَنْ أَبِي هُرَيْرَةَ قَالَ قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ الْمُؤْمِنُ الْقَوِيُّ خَيْرٌ وَأَحَبُّ إِلَى اللَّهِ مِنَ الْمُؤْمِنِ الضَّعِيفِ وَفِي كُلِّ خَيْرٍ أَحْرَصٌ عَلَى مَا يَنْفَعُكَ وَاسْتَعِينُ بِاللَّهِ وَلَا تَعْجِزُ فَإِنْ أَصَابَكَ شَيْءٌ فَلَا تَقُلْ لَوْ أَنِّي فَعَلْتُ كَذَا وَكَذَا وَلَكِنْ قُلْ قَدَرَهُ اللَّهُ وَمَا شَاءَ فَعَلَ فَإِنَّ لَوْ تَفْتَحُ عَمَلَ الشَّيْطَانِ

*From Abī Hurairah, who said, “The Messenger of AL-LĀH (may GOD bless him and give him peace) said, ‘The strong believer is better and more beloved to AL-LĀH than the weak believer, and in each there is some good. Pursue what benefits you and seek the help of GOD and do not falter. And if something befalls you, do not say, “If only I had done this or that.” Rather say, “AL-LĀH has decreed it so, and what He willed He has done.” Truly “If only” opens up the work of Satan.’”*

*Ṣaḥīḥub-nu Mājah, Vol. 1, Book 1, Ḥadīth 79*

This does not mean that we cannot hypothesize for experimental purposes or learn from our mistakes by comparing what we did to what we might have done. Rather the intention of the above tradition is to break our habit of dwelling in non-existent worlds and pining for alternatives to the

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present – His present. There is no enlightenment – no Light, in fact – beyond this Divine moment. It is not a process with predictable consequences, but a wholly new gift that must flow, moment after moment, from The Giver. When you know it is not yours, it may come to you. Otherwise, never.

We are free to accept this Immediate Truth or grasp at the mirages of the past or future or of other places that we think are better. We are also free to choose among an almost limitless range of illusions – our innumerable ‘would’s’ that beckon us away from His One ‘Will.’ We may not mind it when we hear that only in illusion is our freedom ... but then a Day will come to say that freedom was, for us, only an illusion.

## 15.

# GUIDANCE, MISGUIDANCE, AND KARMA



إِنَّا هَدَيْنَاهُ السَّبِيلَ إِمَّا شَاكِرًا وَإِمَّا كَفُورًا

Indeed, We have shown him [mankind] the way, no matter whether he is grateful or ungrateful. (Q76:3)

The reference in the previous Chapter to the verse, **He whom GOD misguides, you will not find for him a way (Q4:143)**, represents a major stumbling block for those who try to place man's moral accountability in a Qur'ānic framework. A casual first reading of this verse, and others like it, suggests that GOD deliberately picks out certain individuals and leads them to destruction. Such an interpretation, however, contradicts many more passages like these:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَظْلِمُ النَّاسَ شَيْئًا وَلَكِنَّ النَّاسَ أَنْفُسُهُمْ يَظْلِمُونَ

Verily AL-LĀH does not do any wrong to humankind, but humans, rather, wrong themselves. (Q10:44)

يُرِيدُ اللَّهُ لِيُبَيِّنَ لَكُمْ وَيَهْدِيَكُمْ سُنْنَ الَّذِينَ مِنْ قَبْلِكُمْ وَيَتُوبَ عَلَيْكُمْ وَاللَّهُ عَلِيمٌ حَكِيمٌ  
وَاللَّهُ يُرِيدُ أَنْ يَتُوبَ عَلَيْكُمْ وَيُرِيدُ الَّذِينَ يَتَّبِعُونَ الشَّهَوَاتِ أَنْ تَمِيلُوا مَيْلًا عَظِيمًا

يُرِيدُ اللَّهُ أَنْ يُخَفِّفَ عَنْكُمْ وَخُلِقَ الْإِنْسَانُ ضَعِيفًا

GOD yearns to make things clear for you and guide you to the ways of those before you and relent to you. And GOD is Knowing, Wise. / AL-LĀH is yearning to relent to you, while those who follow their desires want you to go terribly off course. / GOD yearns to lighten things for you, as mankind was created weak. (Q4:26–28)

A newcomer to GOD, if there is such a creature, might well be excused for asking, ‘So which description is correct? Is GOD The Ever-Caring, Compassionate Deity Who comprehends all our highest ideals, or is He an All-Powerful Dictator Who consigns whom He wills to Hell? To answer this type of question, we need to step back and remind ourselves of some basic concepts that were mentioned earlier.

All verbal descriptions of GOD, including those in the Qur’ān, are ultimately mere expedients or concessions to the limitations of the human mind. This is why *subhānaL-LĀH* is not only an incantation or mantra but a constant reminder of what should form the basis of any true theology – that GOD is inconceivable in His Absolute Unicity, and hence transcendently and forever beyond our mental reach. All descriptions of Who He is and what He does are figurative, not literal, for **Nothing is like Him (Q42:11)**. Because of the natural deficiencies in our understanding, we usually refer to Him one aspect at a time. Like the blind men groping around an elephant, each one touching a different part of the animal – the trunk, a tusk, a leg, a side, the tail – we are fundamentally and inevitably off the mark. The Qur’ān reminds us of that, and nonetheless encourages us to keep trying until we die, for to deliberately give up on GOD is worse than death.

Not only is all language woefully inadequate to approach Him, we should keep in mind that our language is more or less appropriate for Him at various levels of abstraction and respect. AL-LĀH Himself refers to this multi-dimensionality of the language He uses:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَسْتَحْيِي أَنْ يَضْرِبَ مَثَلًا مَّا بَعْضُهُ فَمَا فَوْقَهَا

**Verily AL-LĀH does not disdain to make comparisons to a mosquito, let alone to what is higher. (Q2:26)**

Light has its levels – **Light upon Light! (Q24:35)** – and darkness does too:

ظُلُمَاتٌ بَعْضُهَا فَوْقَ بَعْضٍ

**Darknesses in parts above each other (Q24:40)**

The many levels of light and the various degrees of darkness are not features of a multiplicity within GOD but rather reflect the plurality of our perspectives in approaching or turning away from The Divine. Another passage portrays this multi-dimensionality in astounding fashion:

أَفَمَنْ اتَّبَعَ رِضْوَانَ اللَّهِ كَمَنْ بَاءَ بِسَخَطٍ مِنَ اللَّهِ وَمَأْوَاهُ جَهَنَّمُ وَبِئْسَ  
 الْمَصِيرُ  
 هُمْ دَرَجَاتٌ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ وَاللَّهُ بِمَا يَعْمَلُونَ

Is one who follows what AL-LĀH is pleased with like the one who earns the wrath of GOD and whose abode is Hell? How wretched is that destination! / They are varying degrees with GOD. And GOD is Seeing what they do. (Q3:162–163)

The Arabic text here – **They are varying degrees with GOD** – equates the plurality of attitudes or behaviours people have regarding GOD, or even their identities, to grades in His presence. Their divisions **with** Him (translated by some as **in His sight**) are like the gradations of colour in the rainbow, varying according to the angle at which the one white light passing through them is refracted.

The Light of GOD undergoes a similar refraction in our discussion of Him. In Himself, He is most ‘like’ white light, pure and undifferentiated by any medium or material. GOD’s Light as seen by the angels would be very close to white (i.e., minimally distorted) as well, given their spiritual proximity, obedience, and lack of imagination. And the more angelic we are, the closer the ‘match’ between His One Will and our multi-coloured wills, and the truer our judgement to His Judgement, the more likely it is that His Light will be seen as Guidance.

On the other hand, if our independent choices and judgements determine more and more of our identity, if we deliberately filter GOD’s One Light through our sense of a separate self that we own and control, and if we distinguish our freedom ever more emphatically from that of GOD’s, the Light of GOD is obscured by the shade we take to be our independent power source. We start to feel that His Light is intrusive, His Power arbitrary, and His Judgement in need of our (superior) judgement. Such an attitude becomes our altitude – a vicious circle of lower respect and dimmer understanding.

Hence the expression: **He whom GOD misguides**. The lack of GOD’s Guidance is termed misguidance and attributed to Him – a ‘miss,’ a negative, portrayed as a positive act. Insofar as we base our acts on this negative, we can say that GOD misguides us, as the power to do anything comes from Him. But the direction, heading away from Light, is in fact no way at all – **you will not find for him a way**. If anything can be said to lead to nothing, it is our choice of no way as our way. What we choose *de jure*, considering it to be right, becomes *de facto*, an accomplished fact, by



the momentum of His Light ... being turned off. Nothing is absent from GOD's Will, not even Satan and the choices he suggests to us. When we make those choices ours, we have chosen GOD's misguidance. So He wills it, and so it comes to us, disguised as our own light.<sup>T</sup>

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Consider the concepts of GOD's guidance and misguidance as pre-emptive negations of the Western individualist tendency to claim total ownership and autonomy of one's acts. If you did good, GOD was there before you, giving you a reason to thank Him for His Guidance. And if you did wrong, the power to do so came from GOD likewise. As an act, it manifested His Misguidance, for it took you further from His Light. But the choice was yours; you intended and approved of it when it was done through you, and under your impression that you alone were acting.

For those who have trouble accepting the concept of the dual Will of GOD, which I discussed earlier as the Command of power and the Command of obligation, consider *karma* as a metaphysical contrast. *Karma* in Brahmanism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and other faiths of the East manifests the moral rule of good for good and evil for evil as a natural law of cause and effect. What we perform with deeds or intend in our hearts is rewarded or punished, impartially, automatically, and inscrutably, in the course of our lives or over the course of many lives – hence the need for reincarnation. In this system, our unquenchable thirst for fairness is sated by an unwavering guarantee that not only what we will receive in the future but also what we have now is just; our present suffering or enjoyment is the outcome of what we did, said, or intended in the past.

In this system, too, free will could be problematic. What we will now could be considered the effect of previous deeds and intentions, in a chain of cause and effect that conceivably extends indefinitely into the past. Our Western emphasis on individual free will is, in any case, of little relevance to such a system. On the contrary, the trend in Eastern faiths is to regard the self as merely the vehicle of the actions that bind us as cogs to the wheel of *karma*. When we relinquish the concept of self, the karmic machine grinds on without us. We – our illusory selves, that is – are nowhere to be found. This non-presence within the mechanism of ethical cause and effect is referred to as extinction, or *nirvana*.

All of these basic concepts have their analogues in Qur'ānic theology. Although *karma*'s endless chain of causation and reincarnation are not

found in the Qur'ān as such, resurrection and the Everafter are essential pillars of the faith, and serve a similar need for compensatory justice. The Way (*sunnah*) of GOD normally operates in the same way *karma* does, as an invariable law of reward and retribution.

مَنْ عَمِلَ صَالِحًا فَلِنَفْسِهِ وَمَنْ أَسَاءَ فَعَلَيْهَا ثُمَّ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكُمْ تُرْجَعُونَ

**The good one does is for oneself, and sin is done against it. Then unto your Lord you are returned. (Q45:15)**

The self-noughting of *nirvana*, moreover, is basically the same as the extinction, or *fanā*, referred to here:

كُلُّ مَنْ عَلَيْهَا فَانٍ  
وَيَبْقَىٰ وَجْهُ رَبِّكَ ذُو الْجَلَالِ وَالْإِكْرَامِ

**Everything on it [the Earth] is vanishing, / And there remains the Visage of your Master, Lord of Majesty and Honour. (Q55:26–27)**

The one notable difference between the Way of GOD and the way of *karma* is that the former is personal. If we were to recast the decrees and judgements of GOD as a mechanical system, it would look very much like *karma*. In both cases, personal or impersonal, on a Day of Judgement or by ongoing and automatic moral law, one receives the just consequences of one's deeds.

*Karma* could be described as how the Divine Will is perceived when one regards GOD as absent or non-existent. The prospect of a happy or unhappy rebirth reminds us that the natural moral order is in effect, if not visible, and guidance and misguidance are like two signposts pointing in opposite directions, to and from salvation (*moksha*) or extinction of the self (*nirvana*). The attractiveness of this system is precisely its lack of a personal element; we can accept it matter-of-factly, in the same way we accept gravity and inertia.

But AL-LĀH is not absent, and His Personality pervades the universe more completely, whole-heartedly, and minutely than our personalities direct and inform our physical bodies. Pleasure and suffering are His to dispense at will, usually as reinforcements or correctives to our deeds. Guidance and misguidance are the ethical correlates to reward and punishment, marking the effects our judgements, along with their consequent intentions and subsequent actions, have upon our souls. Unlike in *karma*, however, where the system's chains of cause and effect envelop and consume the

wills of individuals, the Freedom of GOD is not bound to follow any law – hence the importance of Compassion, Forgiveness, and unlimited reward:

إِنَّمَا يُوفَّى الصَّابِرُونَ أَجْرَهُمْ بِغَيْرِ حِسَابٍ

**Verily the wage of those who persevere is rendered without measure. (Q39:10)**

It should be clear, therefore, that impersonal karmic law and Divine Qur’ānic Judgement are two ways of describing the same course of cosmic justice, but at different levels of appreciation. If we have no time or use for GOD, then His Justice will still apply. What we feel to be its positive or negative outcomes will be construed as the workings of *karma*, while AL-LĀH characterizes its effects upon our souls as guidance or misguidance, depending on whether those outcomes move us closer to or further from Him.

If, on the other hand, we attribute Personal Agency to those outcomes, we will, as believers do, consider them as His rewards and tribulations. If we welcome GOD’s involvement in our lives, it counts as Divine Guidance as well. But if we resent His Decrees, which for the believer are always good, and instead regard their power and scope as arbitrary limits on our personal freedom, then we are having a firsthand experience of Divine Misguidance.

When we speak of GOD’s Will or His Approval, we are applying our experiences and interpretations of what these mean to One for Whom these actions and attitudes are ultimately inappropriate. Discussing them is, however, effective if they help us develop spiritual faculties of truth, love, peace, and goodness in us. To us, His Will and His Approval operate at different levels of meaning, and so we can speak of acts that occur by His Will and Approval and others that occur by His Will, as all events do, but without His Approval. The Light of AL-LĀH that we receive with His Approval becomes less distinct, more contaminated by our own desires, as His Approval means ever less to us and we contend with our wills against His.

What we call it or how we experience it does not change what it is. And even when the Qur’ān uses different terms and explains the same thing in ways that seem to be contradictory, we need to remember that GOD, Who is Unchanging, is nevertheless somehow able to cater to the contradictions and limitations within and among ourselves and describe one phenomenon at various levels and in light of the various perspectives

we bring to His Revelation. Ultimately, it is He Who is The One and Only Phenomenon, and His Names and Actions, related to us in the Qur'ān, are but so many means of getting us to relate to Him.

## 16.

# MAKING ROOM FOR 'GOD-FORSAKEN'



There is, of course, no place totally forsaken by GOD, not even Hell. If it is GOD Who gives us meaning, then 'godless' is actually meaningless. Yet we use such words because a world of uniformity, of no difference between its parts, is simply unintelligible to the human mind. The purest monism must, finally, concede some ground to our verbal distinctions if it is to have any currency at all. And so if Heaven as our home with GOD is to have any real meaning or direction for us, we need to say what its opposite is like. Here are several more reasons why the Qur'ān focuses so intensely on the negative conundrum that we call Hell.

1. More than we know our own selves, we recognize GOD – The Ultimate Convergence of our highest values. Or I should say we know of GOD, for He cannot be known in His Absolute Infinity by anyone but Himself. Nonetheless we respond positively to Him, for *truly AL-LĀH created Ādam in His image*. This likeness implies a liking, a natural affinity – **the nature of AL-LĀH by which He made humanity (Q30:30)** – and thus a propensity to understand The Immanent and Imminent Divinity. **Know that GOD comes in between the human being and his heart [immanently], and that to Him you will be gathered [imminently]. (Q8:24)**

— Hell, on the other hand, is the ultimate rejectable (*munkar* in Arabic), repulsive in the extreme, and utterly alien and hostile to humanity. It is thus by far the most easily deniable of all unpleasant truths (which is why so many nowadays dismiss the idea of it), and even more so because it is the repository and destination of all that is untrue. But do we live in a world that is entirely true, just, pleasant, and beautiful? Clearly, we do not. Then Hell, in some form or other, must 'exist.' (The ironic 'quote marks' are intentional.)

2. To seek the Face of AL-LĀH is to work towards the pinnacle of our knowledge and then, in the supreme act of faith, step up above that last point of solidity into the transcendence beyond. To deal with GOD is to accept the fundamental reality of the supersensory, a domain we all feel and speak of but can never measure.

— Hell, by contrast, lies within the realm of the subsensory. If GOD is The Highest we know, and is even Greater than that (as we affirm by *AL-LĀHU Akbar*), the Pit of Hell is the lowest of the low, and goes even lower than we know. GOD cannot be grasped, while Hell cannot be fathomed. It does not call; it whispers subliminally. It does not command; it seduces and insinuates. There is nothing straight or direct about it, and hence dragons and snakes, such as the serpent in the Bible's story of Ādam and Eve, are among its symbols. It produces nothing, but, like a star that has collapsed in on itself to form a black hole, is ready to consume and destroy everything.

يَوْمَ نَقُولُ لِجَهَنَّمَ هَلْ اَمْتَلَاتِ وَتَقُولُ هَلْ مِنْ مَزِيدٍ

On the day We say to Hell, “Have you been filled?” and it says, “Is there more?” (Q50:30)

3. The Light of GOD, as described earlier in Chapter 2, is one of His most revealing symbols; it can be alternately effusive and penetrating, uplifting and humbling, a blessing for those who love openness and honesty, and a blight for those who need to conceal what they do. Clarity of thinking, union of hearts, and fairness for all require Light. Divine Light pervades every endeavour for honesty, solidarity, and justice, and so the virtuous are instinctively attracted to the Light of GOD.

— Hell welcomes all that Light is not. If I plan to secretly foment discord, seize advantages for myself alone, and hide my reasons for doing so, I must have darkness on my side. If I am seeking to avoid just censure, protect my position at all costs, mix some falsehood with the truth, or deceive the public for personal gain, I mine my baser instincts for ideas. If I have to justify my misdemeanours by pointing to the crimes of others, then the denizens of Hell are there, ready to offer their despicable examples.

وَإِنَّ الظَّالِمِينَ بَعْضُهُمْ أَوْلِيَاءُ بَعْضٍ

Truly the unjust are friends allied to one another. (Q45:19)

If I consider myself better than the common herd, then I can take Iblīs, who first said **“I am superior to him,”** as my mentor. And if I feel that lying is acceptable, then I should know that Hell, too, accepts liars.

4. AL-LĀH is The Living, Everlasting, and therefore those He loves, and thus love Him, are guaranteed to share in His Eternal Life.

وَإِنَّ الدَّارَ الْآخِرَةَ لَهِيَ الْحَيَوَانُ

**And verily the dwelling of the Everafter is the [real] Life. (Q29:64)**

He is The Possessor of Unity, Mercy, Knowledge, Truth, Justice, Beauty, and Peace, and consequently those who strive for these qualities with faith (for they cannot realize them completely in this life) and sincerity are entitled to their share in His Life accordingly. These are not mere abstract assertions of belief; they represent a person's moral identity. To 'go through the motions' of a faith without these moral qualities is no way to salvation.

سَمِعْتُ أَبَا هُرَيْرَةَ يَقُولُ قِيلَ لِلنَّبِيِّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ إِنَّ فُلَانَةً تَقُومُ اللَّيْلَ وَتَصُومُ النَّهَارَ وَتَفْعَلُ وَتَصَدَّقُ وَتُؤْذِي جِيرَانَهَا بِلِسَانِهَا فَقَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ لَا خَيْرَ فِيهَا هِيَ مِنْ أَهْلِ النَّارِ

*I heard Abā Hurairah say, “It was said to the Prophet (may GOD bless him and give him peace), ‘O Messenger of AL-LĀH, a woman stands for prayer by night, and fasts by day, and performs [acts of piety] and gives in charity, and injures her neighbours by her tongue.’ The Messenger of AL-LĀH (may GOD bless him and give him peace) replied, ‘There is no good in her. She is among the people of the Fire.’”*

*(Al-Adab Al-Mufrad 119)*

— Parallel to the real life of the spirit that people can participate in here, and know fully in the Everafter, Hell is also described as a **dwelling** or **abode** in many verses. But it is a place where one

لَا يَمُوتُ فِيهَا وَلَا يَحْيَا

**neither dies in it nor lives. (Q87:13)**

Stripped of this world's glitter, glamour, gains, and disguises, the life of Hell is seen for what it always was, and what many of its denizens proudly claim to be their only mission – bare survival. When shorn of all morals and ethical ideals, this is what the Darwinian struggle for existence looks like in the domain of spiritual realities – an ugly, painful, endless persistence for its own sake. Brute facts, ungraced by GOD's nobler qualities, mutate, repeat, and smolder on miserably in the half-life He has always given facts. We cannot call it a fully human life, but it is a life form nonetheless, for the spark of GOD, once fanned into life by His Breath, His Aspiration for that particular spirit He created, can never die.

5. The Light of GOD, like all His other Attributes, is One, but the shadows cast by the blockage of that Light are many. Each of us has his or her own shadow, a testament to both His One Light and the diversity of our partial access to it. GOD's Love reaches around behind our individual boulders, the illusions we have built up to protect our fragile egos, and coaxes us to lower our defences, to stop cowering behind our false idols, and come out into the brilliance of His Mercy. Awareness of our shadow-nature, the darkness in us, is a precondition for full recognition of the Light that would dispel it. This turning away from our darkness to His Light is termed *taubah* in Arabic, or repentance. Our turning to GOD coincides with His turn to us, and this convergence of wills is what I described earlier as real freedom. It coincides with a Divine Blessing that we experience as GOD's Forgiveness. None of us can heal or be whole without it.

عَنْ أَبِي هُرَيْرَةَ رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُ قَالَ قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ لَنْ يُنَجِّي أَحَدًا مِنْكُمْ عَمَلُهُ قَالُوا وَلَا أَنْتَ يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ قَالَ وَلَا أَنَا إِلَّا أَنْ يَتَغَمَّدَنِي اللَّهُ بِرَحْمَةٍ

*From Abī Hurairah (may AL-LĀH be pleased with him), who said, "The Messenger of AL-LĀH (may GOD bless him and give him peace) said, 'Not one of you will be saved by his deeds.' [Those present] asked, 'Nor you, O Messenger of AL-LĀH?' 'Nor me,' he replied, 'unless AL-LĀH covers me with Mercy.'"*

(*Ṣaḥīḥul-Bukhārī, Book 81, Ḥadīth 52*)

عَنْ أَنَسٍ قَالَ قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ كُلُّ بَنِي آدَمَ خَطَّاءٌ وَخَيْرُ الْخَطَّائِينَ التَّوَّابُونَ



*From Anas, who said, "The Messenger of AL-LĀH (may GOD bless him and give him peace) said, 'Every son of Ādam errs, and the best of those who err are the repentant.'"*

*(Ṣaḥīḥub-nu Mājah, Vol. 37, Book 1, Ḥadīth 4392)*

Repentance, when meant sincerely and not intended as a tactic for regaining sympathy, approval, or control, is a statement of faith, and ultimately an ontological act. The penitent affirms by his or her remorse that there is a higher world that negates the power plays, facades, and frauds of this one. It is not just a reaction to getting caught. Punishment may prompt it, but the source of true repentance is not what happens in this life, but rather seeing what always should have been and should always be. It affirms that moral direction matters more than mere matters of fact.

— Hell, on the other hand, is GOD's response to our refusal to repent. People consign themselves to Hell not primarily by what they do – for all of us deserve some suffering for our sins – but what they do unrepentantly, by their confirmed choice of darkness when Light was available. The amoral calculations that never rise above realpolitik are written on the walls of Hell and Wall Street, in the netherworld of anti-values, of lies that take on a pseudo-life of their own. Besieged as we are by today's secular corporate mass media, we might even say that we are experiencing this 3D amorality first-hand, well in advance of the Everafter.

وَإِنَّ جَهَنَّمَ لَمُحِيطَةٌ بِالْكَافِرِينَ

**Truly Hell surrounds the faithless. (Q9:49)**

6. Arguments against GOD invariably employ one common fallacy; they make the good, i.e., whatever qualities the arguer thinks GOD lacks, the enemy of The Best. They operate in an imaginal space where GOD could somehow be removed from the system and the system would somehow stand on its own. Without 'GOD,' however, 'GOOD' is nought – 'O.'

بِيَدِكَ الْخَيْرُ إِنَّكَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ

**In Your Hand is the Good. Indeed, You have control of everything. (Q3:26)**

This is not to say that those who deny GOD are consciously denying

goodness in its entirety, or that they themselves are utterly worthless. But by dissociating GOD from The Good, they have denied themselves the organic personality that generates spiritual vision, of seeing ‘what ought to be’ become ‘Who is.’ They have contributed to the disintegration of human wholeness, no matter how devoted they may be to their individual ideals. And the same may be said of those who insist on GOD as an idea or belief and neglect the personal and communal virtues that are integral elements of what GOD as The Whole Good means. They too have torn the Divine fabric within themselves, as indicated, for example, in the *ḥadīth* about the woman mentioned on the previous page.

— Hell is the Divine reaction to that tear in the underlying material of the true cosmos, the Everafter. It constitutes a container of sorts for the nullity that we fall into by a force as compelling as gravity when we can no longer bear the strain of staying upright.

وَأَمَّا مَنْ خَفَّتْ مَوَازِينُهُ  
فَأُمُّهُ هَاوِيَةٌ

**And as for one whose measure is deficient, / His home is the Abyss.**  
(Q101:8–9)

AL-LĀH has portrayed it as a place, a living being (as the word for **home** here actually means **mother** in Arabic), and a pseudo-life of torment – for so it will feel when we come to realize what we chose – falsehood – and what we rejected – Truth.

7. If we speak of ‘Good’ in the abstract, our hearts miss what seems most genuine to us in this world – people, places, and things. This is why the Qur’ān describes the Ultimate Good as ‘the Garden,’ a place whose features are sensual and stirring – beautiful, chaste companions residing in palaces, delicious fruits and drinks, flowing streams, and so on. This is life in GOD’s Life, or life with Him. This is GOD’s answer to those who say that real good goes unrewarded, or that good people suffer unjustly. We need to hear and see that justice is not merely an abstract ideal, but a tangible, lasting reality.

— The same applies to Hell. We might call it the logical corollary of the Garden. Hell is GOD’s answer to those who see that the unjust, the inveterate liar, the arrogant, and the criminally powerful get off scot-free in this life, or who complain that many of humanity’s worst specimens live lives of unbridled power, undeserved fame, and shameless

luxury, and then die peacefully in their beds. This is why the Qur'ān describes the absence of Good in horrifying detail – iron hooks, heavy chains, searing flames, evil companions, disgusting odours, agonizing scenes, and heart-rending screams. This is life without The Living Good; nothing of it is left but its Power to place real limits on the apparently limitless potential of lies. We – that is, humans and *jinn* – are the ones who fill that emptiness, that gap, with what we think is real – ourselves.

وَتَمَّتْ كَلِمَةُ رَبِّكَ لَأَمْلَأَنَّ جَهَنَّمَ مِنَ الْجِنَّةِ وَالنَّاسِ أَجْمَعِينَ

**The sentence of your Lord has been fulfilled – “I shall fill Hell with jinn and men together.” (Q11:119)**

The Good is of GOD, from GOD, and returns to GOD. It is the meeting point of reality, beauty, growth, and peace, conveyed to us in terms of a home called *Firdaus*, or Paradise. Evil, consequently, must be a nullity, a void, a place of grotesque, pernicious lies, mindless consumption, and heartless misery. Its ultimate futility and feebleness are conveyed to us in terms of a place called *Jahannam*, or Hell. The falsehoods destined for Hell are not of GOD, nor are they from GOD, nor are they ever redeemed. They are only true in the sense that  $0 = 0$  is true, or by saying that souls are worth no more than stones because both are facts. The choice of such sterile truths, the most lifeless idols imaginable,

*at length betrays*

*Your heart to false yet endless pain  
When all is joined in one again.*

# 17.

## HELL UNVEILED



Despite our need to locate Heaven by its opposite, nothing is more inherently offensive and intolerable for today's secular mindset than the subject of Hell. We tend to suspect the motives and rationality of anyone who defends it, let alone threatens others with it. The Qur'ān, however, is full of 'fire and brimstone' and verses that consign its enemies to the flames, seemingly with both relish and abandon. It reads as if GOD is going out of His way to flout all the maxims of modern marketing and the permissive mores of contemporary society. Nonetheless, everything I have written here so far leads to this, the thorniest and most paradoxical topic in this book.

If we want to understand the rationale for Hell, we could start by listening to what its residents have to say about themselves when replying to their Lord.

أَلَمْ تَكُنْ آيَاتِي تُتْلَىٰ عَلَيْكُمْ فَكُنْتُمْ بِهَا تُكَذِّبُونَ  
قَالُوا رَبَّنَا غَلَبَتْ عَلَيْنَا شِقْوَتُنَا وَكُنَّا قَوْمًا ضَالِّينَ  
رَبَّنَا أَخْرِجْنَا مِنْهَا فَإِنْ عُدْنَا فَإِنَّا ظَالِمُونَ

**“Were not My signs read out to you, but you rejected them?” / They reply, “Our Lord, misfortune overcame us, and we were a people gone astray. / Our Lord, remove us from here; if we do the same again, then we would be the sinners.” (Q23:105–107)**

Rather than wholeheartedly confessing that they have been wrongdoers and facing the finality of their situation, these new arrivals do not even bother to answer the charge of having rejected the signs of their Lord. They blame their **misfortune** and ask for a second chance as if they had not had sufficient opportunities and warnings the first time. They fail to admit the justice in their suffering – the first vital step in any sincere change.

وَقَالَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا رَبَّنَا أَرْنَا الَّذِينَ ضَلَّانَا مِنَ الْجِنَّ وَالْإِنْسِ  
نَجْعُلُهُمَا تَحْتَ أَقْدَامِنَا لِيَكُونُوا مِنَ الْأَسْفَلِينَ

And those who were unfaithful say, “Our Lord, show to us the *jinn* and men who misdirected us, that we might put them both beneath our feet and let them be among the lowest.” (Q41:29)

Even in the Fire, they squander their prayers to GOD in mutual recriminations, requests for vengeance, and concerns with their position vis-à-vis the other inhabitants.

Contrast this quarrelsome, complaining, and useless verbiage of Hell with the self-effacing praise and gratitude expressed by the denizens of the Garden:

وَنَزَعْنَا مَا فِي صُدُورِهِمْ مِنْ غِلٍّ تَجْرِي مِنْ تَحْتِهِمُ الْأَنْهَارُ وَقَالُوا  
الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ الَّذِي هَدَانَا لِهَذَا وَمَا كُنَّا لِنَهْتَدِيَ لَوْلَا أَنْ هَدَانَا اللَّهُ لَقَدْ  
جَاءَتْ رُسُلُ رَبِّنَا بِالْحَقِّ

And We remove the rancour in their hearts, with rivers flowing at their feet, and they say, “Praise is for AL-LĀH Who guided us to this, and we would not be rightly guided other than with guidance given us by GOD. Our Master’s messengers have come with truth.” (Q7:43)

Another verse appears to prove that new arrivals in Hell achieve a measure of instant enlightenment:

وَلَوْ تَرَى إِذِ الْمُجْرِمُونَ نَاكِسُوا رُءُوسِهِمْ عِنْدَ رَبِّهِمْ رَبَّنَا أَبْصَرْنَا  
وَسَمِعْنَا فَانْجِعْنَا نَعْمَلْ صَالِحًا إِنَّا مُوقِنُونَ

If only you could see the criminals, their heads bent down, before their Lord. “Our Master, we have seen and heard, so send us back that we might act with righteousness. Indeed we are convinced.” (Q32:12)

But in their haste to get out, they do not pause to repent; rather, they claim their arrival has achieved its purpose, as if they were on a study tour. They do not begin to rectify their spiritual state by identifying it; rather they only seek to escape, and will say anything to get free.

Hell is an educational experience, but so is life. If a whole lifetime is not enough to learn that GOD is Greater than all else we might value, then Hell will certainly turn out to be more than just an academic pit-stop. And so we read:

وَمَنْ كَانَ فِي هَذِهِ أَعْمَى فَهُوَ فِي الْآخِرَةِ أَعْمَى وَأَضَلُّ سَبِيلًا

And he who here was blind is, in the Everafter, blind and even more astray. (Q17:72)

Eventually, however, the inhabitants of Hell will learn, and on GOD's terms, not theirs. This is why AL-LĀH, after referring to those who are most misguided –

قُلْ أَرَأَيْتُمْ إِنْ كَانَ مِنَ عِنْدِ اللَّهِ ثُمَّ كَفَرْتُمْ بِهِ مَنْ أَضَلُّ مِمَّنْ هُوَ فِي شِقَاقٍ بَعِيدٍ

Say, “Have you considered that if it were from AL-LĀH, then you rejected it, who would be more astray than one who is the most extreme in schism?” (Q41:52)

– goes on to render His response in a verse we encountered in Chapter 1: **We shall manifest to them Our signs on the horizons and within themselves until it is apparent to them that it is the Truth. Is it not sufficient that your Lord is Witness over everything? (Q41:53).** In other words, the progress of Truth as the replacement of our ego-centred narrative with the GOD-centred outlook of the Final Witness will continue until we affirm that

إِنَّهُ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ مُّحِيطٌ

Truly He encompasses all things. (Q41:54)

The three things needed for this process to take place in the heart of the tormented soul are mentioned in the verses following the hapless request for a ‘return ticket’ from Hell (Q32:12).

وَلَوْ شِئْنَا لَآتَيْنَا كُلَّ نَفْسٍ هُدَاهَا وَلَكِنْ حَقَّ الْقَوْلُ مِنِّي لَأَمْلَأَنَّ جَهَنَّمَ مِنَ الْجِنَّةِ وَالنَّاسِ أَجْمَعِينَ

If We so willed, We could have given every soul its guidance, but the Word from Me has proven true: “I shall indeed fill Hell with *jinn* and men together.” (Q32:13)

- (1) Sense of Responsibility: Giving every soul its guidance is the spiritual equivalent of 24-hour enlightenment or the coddled-baby universe I mentioned in Chapter 6. Guaranteed success is no success at all, as it

would result in the whole spiritual adventure losing its meaning and purpose. Real success requires the possibility of real failure, and real failure means an actual encounter with an outcome whose harm is proportionate to the benefit of success. AL-LĀH did not create robots, but complex beings whose wills feel free and whose choices can have dire consequences. The mature soul accepts this risk and grows accordingly. And those who think that the universe lacks a moral core – lacks the Divine, in other words – choose to shirk this responsibility and pay the price when they find that their lives were never free in the way they imagined.

- (2) Rule of Law: Several *ahādīth* confirm that AL-LĀH is also committed to filling Paradise, but that will not be the main concern of those whose crimes or lack of faith have brought them to the gates of Hell. When we reject GOD, we reject His Mercy, and that leaves us with His Word. Without His personalized promise of Forgiveness, we must face His impersonal promise of rigorous Justice. When we treat GOD as merely one more item or an idea in our heads, we cannot complain if He does likewise with us. When we abandon The Living GOD, we adopt the default processes of the unliving – entropy, destruction, and death. Human negligence is reflected back as Divine Neglect.

فَذُوقُوا بِمَا نَسِيتُمْ لِقَاءَ يَوْمِكُمْ هَذَا إِنَّا نَسِينَاكُمْ وَذُوقُوا عَذَابَ الْخُلْدِ  
بِمَا كُنْتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ

**Taste the fact that you forgot this rendezvous of yours. We have forgotten you, and taste the punishment of permanence for what you used to do. (Q32:14)**

- (3) Intensity of Feeling: I referred to the Light of GOD in Chapter 2 as being too strong for human faculties to bear. This world has, consequently, been designed to soften the impact of Truth: space diffuses its intensity for us to see discrete parts of it, and time parcels it out that we might hear it at our own pace. But when we fail to use our sight and hearing in the pursuit of Truth, GOD resorts to other senses to drive His Message home, namely taste and touch. The full force of GOD with the gloves off, as it were, concentrates a process that penetrates to the core of who we are, searching for what is truly GOD's amid all that we considered to belong to us alone.

Reversing the order of verses in Q32:12-14, the Fire begins with our feelings, teaches us law and justice, and works to brand responsibility upon

our soul. What could we possibly know of that? Almost all of us have felt it, of course. We call it conscience.

وَمَا أَدْرَاكَ مَا الْحُطْمَةُ  
نَارُ اللَّهِ الْمَوْقَدَةُ  
الَّتِي تَطَّلِعُ عَلَى الْأَفْئِدَةِ

**And what will make you realize what the Wrecker is? / The kindled Fire of GOD, / That searches, from above, the hearts. (Q104:5–7)**

The **Fire of GOD** is Conscience, reified and released into the material realm at the end of time to do its proper work.<sup>U</sup>

### U

Critics may think that I am dismissing the descriptions of Hell in the Qur'ān as not objectively real. My point, however, is that searing flames and disgusting fluids are terrifying enough for those who believe in physical reality, but the spiritual agony those images represent is actually far more compelling and genuine. Just think of the real, immeasurable pain that causes so many healthy adolescents to commit suicide. Or, conversely, think of the mental fortitude of so many martyrs who calmly endured physical pain because they were sustained by their inner peace and power. The anguish of Hell will be more than what we can imagine because there will no longer be a refuge for us in 'mind over matter.'

Hell is repeatedly described as a bad place in the Qur'ān, and its punishments are frightening and gruesome. But these are necessary and deserved torments, representing the impact of the Good on hitherto unpunished crime and ingratitude. It is particularly hard on those who had no conscience – the very worst of humanity – or who thought they could dispense with it or ignore it. The Fire of GOD is painful for the same reason as our pangs of conscience are painful; they touch sore spots that must not be left untouched. If the whole heart is diseased, then the act of healing must be correspondingly, and entirely, severe. It is the dosage, not the medicine, that will be unprecedented and intolerable.

By calling something, such as the Fire, **of GOD**, AL-LĀH is clearly indicating that there is an attribute of it which is greater than sheer loss and destruction. If Hell had no merit whatsoever, then the references to fire in the Qur'ān and the *aḥādīth* would all be negative ... but they are not.



عَنْ عُبَادَةَ رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُ عَنِ النَّبِيِّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ قَالَ مَنْ شَهِدَ أَنْ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ وَحْدَهُ لَا شَرِيكَ لَهُ وَأَنَّ مُحَمَّدًا عَبْدُهُ وَرَسُولُهُ وَأَنَّ عِيسَى عَبْدُ اللَّهِ وَرَسُولُهُ وَكَلِمَتُهُ أَلْفَاها إِلَى مَرْيَمَ وَرُوحٌ مِنْهُ وَالْجَنَّةُ حَقٌّ وَالنَّارُ حَقٌّ أَدْخَلَهُ اللَّهُ الْجَنَّةَ عَلَى مَا كَانَ مِنَ الْعَمَلِ

*From ‘Ubādah (may GOD be pleased with him), from the Prophet (may GOD bless him and give him peace), who said, “AL-LĀH will cause whoever testifies that there is no god but AL-LĀH, the One without partners, and that Muḥammad is His Slave and Messenger, and that ‘Isā is the Slave of AL-LĀH and His Messenger and His Word bestowed on Maryam and a Spirit from Him, and that the Garden is true, and that the Fire is true, to enter Paradise with whatever he had of deeds.”*

*(Ṣaḥīḥul-Bukhārī, Book 60, Ḥadīth 106)*

The Garden and the Fire are given equal billing, so to speak, as *true*, but with the Garden taking its natural precedence.

عَنْ أَبِي هُرَيْرَةَ قَالَ قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ كَتَبَ رَبُّكُمْ عَلَى نَفْسِهِ بِيدِهِ قَبْلَ أَنْ يَخْلُقَ الْخَلْقَ رَحْمَتِي سَبَقَتْ غَضَبِي

*From Abī Hurairah, who said “The Messenger of AL-LĀH (may GOD bless him and give him peace) said, ‘Your Lord prescribed for Himself by His Own Hand, before He created the creation: “My Mercy precedes My Wrath.”*

*(Sunanub-ni Mājah, Book 1, Ḥadīth 194)*

We tend to regard GOD’s Mercy and His Wrath as abstract emotions that have nothing to do with us. The Garden and the Fire exist to make us realize that those descriptions of Divine Pleasure and Displeasure are not mere literary terms, however symbolic of an incomprehensibly intense Reality they may be, and have everything to do with us. In this life, our pangs of conscience could be considered echoes of the Wrath of GOD, transmitted to our hearts from beyond our own graves. Since GOD’s Mercy, however, according to a similar *ḥadīth* (*Jāmi’ut-Tirmidhī, Book 48, Ḥadīth 174*), *overcomes My Wrath*, fire can be mitigated or reversed. We see this in the story of Ibrāhīm (peace be upon him).

قَالُوا حَرِّفُوهُ وَانصُرُوا آلِهَتَكُمْ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ فَاعِلِينَ  
فُلْنَا يَا نَارُ كُونِي بَرْدًا وَسَلَامًا عَلَى إِبْرَاهِيمَ

They said, “Burn him and support your gods if you are bent on doing it.” / We spoke, “O Fire, be cool and safe for Ibrāhīm.” (Q21:68–69)

An even more positive connotation of fire is evident in the story of Mūsā (peace be upon him).

إِذْ قَالَ مُوسَىٰ لِأَهْلِهِ إِنِّي آنَسْتُ نَارًا سَآتِيكُمْ مِنْهَا بِخَبَرٍ أَوْ آتِيكُمْ  
بِشِهَابٍ قَبَسٍ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَصْطَلُونَ  
فَلَمَّا جَاءَهَا نُودِيَ أَنْ بُورِكَ مَنْ فِي النَّارِ وَمَنْ حَوْلَهَا وَسُبْحَانَ اللَّهِ  
رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ

And [take heed] when Mūsā told his household, “Verily I see a fire. I shall bring you some report from it, or bring a burning firebrand that you may warm yourselves.” / But when he came to it, a voice was heard: “Blessed is the one within the fire and the one around it, and transcendent is AL-LĀH, The Master of the worlds.” (Q27:7–8)

Fire (*nār* in Arabic) is a source of light (*nūr*) and information, a provider of warmth, a means of communication, and, in this story, a locus of blessing, glorification, and enlightenment.

Then we have what is commonly known as the Light Verse (Q24:35). The main part of it that concerns us here is:

اللَّهُ نُورُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ مِثْلُ نُورِهِ كَمِشْكَاةٍ فِيهَا مِصْبَاحٌ  
الْمِصْبَاحُ فِي زُجَاجَةٍ الزُّجَاجَةُ كَأَنَّهَا كَوْكَبٌ دُرِّيٌّ يُوقَدُ مِنْ شَجَرَةٍ  
مُبَارَكَةٍ زَيْتُونَةٍ لَا شَرْقِيَّةٍ وَلَا غَرْبِيَّةٍ يَكَادُ زَيْتُهَا يُضِيءُ وَلَوْ لَمْ  
تَمْسَسْهُ نَارٌ نُّورٌ عَلَى نُورٍ

AL-LĀH is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The likeness of His Light is of a niche, wherein there is a lamp. The lamp is in a glass. The glass is as it were a pearly star, ignited from a blessed olive tree, not of the east nor of the west. Its oil is almost luminous, though fire does not touch it. Light on Light! (Q24:35)

There is, it seems, more to **fire** than what meets the skin. When something as commonly understood to be negative in the Qur’ān as the Fire positively glows with associations such as these, we need to take a second look at Hell from the point of view of Light.

# 18.

## ENLIGHTENING FIRE



قَالَ عَذَابِي أُصِيبُ بِهِ مَنْ أَشَاءُ وَرَحْمَتِي وَسِعَتْ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ

He said, “I cause My punishment to fall on whom I will. And My Benevolence embraces everything.” (Q7:156)

As I have said before, the Names of GOD are only various ways of describing what is ultimately a single Reality, one that we are unable to grasp in any way other than partially. Qualities such as Merciful, Knowing, and Powerful, however different their meanings for us, are actually coextensive and coincident, for there is no variety or division in the Unicity of GOD.<sup>v</sup> So when we come to **the kindled Fire of GOD**, which represents

v

To help conceptualize this paradox of how we perceive GOD’s Absolute Oneness through a variety of names and descriptions, and finally in the divine aspect of every created being, consider a solar system in which planets revolve around the sun, symbolizing God, at various distances. At ground zero, (i.e., the sun’s own location), there is no distance from the light, no perspective, and hence no difference. Now imagine at each interval in a planet’s orbit around the sun, the view changes, but the difference in perspective is not recognized as such, but instead attributed to the sun itself. A planet close to the sun has a more ‘accurate’ view of the sun and, because its orbit is smaller, has fewer ‘perspectives’ to report. The denizens of a distant planet, on the other hand, with an attenuated view, greater interference in the light emitted by the sun because of the greater distance, and a larger variety of perspectives over the course of a longer period, will tend to see the sun as more multiform and have more detail to describe. The details actually reflect the ‘experience’ the planet’s people are having rather than the true nature of the sun. Observers on distant planets will also give more notice to the presence of other stars,

## V (continued)

since their horizons are not dominated by sunlight to the same extent as planets further in with tighter orbits.

In the same way, each Name of GOD represents the aspect of Him we experience at a certain point in our circumambulation around Him, the Centre of our existence. We attribute to Him the Names we use because of our diverse perspectives. These Names help us keep our attention focused on His Light. But that Light is an Indivisible Unity, which He has enabled us to safely enjoy at length and in various hues and intensities, each according to his or her distance from His Essence. At this time, in our present state of unpreparedness, if we were to approach too closely in our orbit, we could be annihilated.

His Wrath, we are really talking about His Mercy, but in a form that terrifies and pains us for as long as we do not accept it as Mercy.

And so it is that the parable (**likeness**) of Light in **Q24:35** begins with **His Light** but ends with **fire** ... a progression I have followed in elaborating on GOD as Light in Chapter 2 and arriving here, at the end of Part II, with Hell as Enlightening Fire. Just as GOD's Mercy precedes and overcomes His Wrath, so does His Light come before and then subsume His Fire. His **Benevolence embraces everything**, and His Light, likewise, illuminates **the heavens and the earth**, (i.e., all created things, including Hell). Fire itself is a form of Divine Light, and embodies both luminescence and warmth, the latter of which serves for many as their first experience of Love. Darkness is the absence of light, as evil is the absence of good, but Hell is neither itself evil nor completely dark. It is, rather, where the wrongdoers come to say **abṣarnā – we have seen (Q32:12)**. Their first sight of Hell, insufficient though it proves to be, is illuminated by its flames.

Before discussing the parable directly, we need to remember that the Light referred to here is supersensory Light. The physical light that appears in various forms in the parable is the symbol of a higher, more refined Reality that we 'see' with our hearts and minds, not our eyes. GOD makes this clear at the end of the same verse:

يَهْدِي اللَّهُ لِنُورِهِ مَنْ يَشَاءُ وَيَضْرِبُ اللَّهُ الْأَمْثَالَ لِلنَّاسِ وَاللَّهُ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمٌ

**GOD guides to His Light whom He wills. And GOD makes parables for mankind. And GOD is Knower of all things. (Q24:35)**

In other words, His Light is the Knowledge by which He comprehends all things, and which He shares with mankind by His Guidance, conveyed through analogies and symbols.

### **AL-LĀH is The Light of the heavens and the earth.**

When He begins by saying, **AL-LĀH is The Light of the heavens and the earth**, He is referring to His creation not only as objects of His knowledge but also as illuminated objects of our knowledge, and light-bearing symbols by which we know gradually more of His Light. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, His Light has two vectors, namely from Him to us in the form of creation and revelation, and from us to Him in the form of study and guidance. Each object in the parable of Light simultaneously manifests some aspect of His Light to us and obscures His Unicity, insofar as each object is not identical with His Light, but rather a **likeness** only. The dual function of these items in the parable, both revealing and concealing, is indicated in the *ḥadīth* cited in Chapter 2 which says **His veil is Light** and in the conclusion of the parable – **Light on Light!**

#### **A. The likeness of His Light is of a niche,**

His Light, the **Light of the heavens and the earth**, is like a niche. A niche is a cavity or recess within a wall, built so that it can hold or support an ornament, such as a lamp. There is a great wealth of meaning in this simile.

First of all, it is not what we would expect. If the lamp inside is lit and visible, we hardly even stop to consider the presence of the niche. And indeed, once the lamp is mentioned, the niche is forgotten. So why is it mentioned at all?

1. Many commentators think that the niche represents the human breast, with the lamp symbolizing the heart inside the breast. But a niche, unlike an enclosed and discrete portion of the human body such as the breast or even the heart itself, is not only open but is actually nothing but space, an extension of the room it illuminates. This reminds us that the Light of GOD is, like GOD Himself, not a separate thing or substance, but in some sense ‘open’ to all that we consider to be not Him. He has not made any impenetrable barrier between His Light and our darkness.
2. The niche is an integral part of the whole room, (i.e., the universe), but our linguistic mode of being needs words for its perceptions (and then

turns around and perceives according to its words), and hence we ‘recess’ the local light of the niche from the relative darkness of the room. The light pervades the room, but we make the niche ‘stand out,’ as it were. Thus it is with the Light of GOD. To speak of it, we must localize it, though it is everywhere, while the darkness we contrast it with is actually nothing and nowhere.

3. Niche light, in this analogy, is both local and diffuse. The light of the lamp strikes the concave hollow of the niche and reflects outwards into the room in all directions. This resembles what we understand light to be in general, regardless of its spiritual dimensions – a display of visible energy in a multitude of forms. The real light is from the lamp, but the niche serves to disperse and redirect it. And so, for the beginner, first entering the room of faith, the brightness of the niche is all he sees; his eyes have not yet adjusted to the glare, beyond which he could recognize the lamp within. Hence the expression **Light on Light!**; light in general, including physical light, seems to be ‘all there is,’ as a materialist might say. For the outsider or the newly arrived, there is nothing more to see. If we fail to see the lamp within the niche, the fault is in us, and is the effect of our ignorance. We have not yet learned where to look, and what to look for.
4. The niche does not exist for itself, but rather was made for the lamp. If we set up decorations or figurines of gods or heroes where our lamp should be, we gain nothing but darkness. The niche, therefore, however bright it may appear to be, has only two true functions – to support the lamp and to cast its light abroad. The lesser light exists to serve the greater, even if it is only the lesser light that gains everyone’s recognition. Affirming this in other terms, GOD declares,

هُوَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ لَكُمْ مَا فِي الْأَرْضِ جَمِيعًا

**He is the One Who made for you all that is on earth. (Q2:29)**

and

إِنَّهُ يَبْدَأُ الْخَلْقَ ثُمَّ يُعِيدُهُ لِيَجْزِيَ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ  
بِالْقِسْطِ

**Truly He began creation then repeats it so that He might justly recompense the ones who had believed and done good deeds. (Q10:4)**

The spirit of the believer (the lamp) is not simply part of the universe (unlike the niche, which is part of the room), but greater than it, and the reason for its being.

**B. wherein there is a lamp.**

**C. The lamp is in a glass.**

The lamp (spirit) appears to be the concentrated source of light in the world. But not all aspects of the lamp are equal. When we read that the **lamp is in a glass**, we realize that there are certain parts of what we know as lamps, namely the solid base and container for the fuel, that are not in the glass, but rather act as a support for it. These aspects correspond to the body where the spirit dwells. The material part of the lamp, below the glass, is probably bathed in light, but does not itself produce it. Thus we are led to focus on the luminous element that constitutes the real interest of the lamp.

**D. The glass is as it were a pearly star,**

The purpose of the glass is to protect the lamp's flame from the wind while transmitting its light with as little interference as possible. The flame could be blown out if the glass is broken, or its light obscured if the glass has become smoke-darkened with impurities. Since the glass stands at some distance from the flame, and performs its task best when least apparent as something other than the flame, despite its solidity, I believe the glass is best identified with religion (*dīn*). Religion is built on teachings, rules, and rituals that insulate us from the gusts of whims and passions, and is meant to be a transparent vehicle for the expression of the spirit. Too often, however, religion is taken to be an end in itself. That misdirection could be likened to a coating of soot on the inside of the glass, which might lead us to think that the light would be brighter without any glass at all, as so many believe nowadays.

At this point in the parable, we encounter an odd turn with the phrase **as it were** (*ka anna hā*). This is where the parable 'takes off' into another dimension of symbolism, where imagination is no longer bound by our conventional experience. The glass is transmuted into a star that glistens like a pearl, indicating not only brilliance but also worth. We are witnessing a changeover from what it is – a glass – to how it should be valued – like a pearl. The light has become not only a fact but also an ideal, and

hence is placed, symbolically, in heaven. While religion as we know it may be corrupted by the smoke of ignorance, its source, which for those of faith can only be revelation, is out of our contaminating reach. This original quintessence of religion is, therefore, more than just a human product or a historical institution. It has a divine mandate and purpose, revealed to us in celestial scriptures and the lives of godly messengers.

### **E. ignited from a blessed olive tree, not of the east nor of the west.**

Until this point, the currency of our parable has been light – physical, mental, and even cultural or social. The glowing glass of religion has, as it were, a heavenly home, represented by a star, another source of light. But when the word **ignited** is mentioned, we are reminded that stars, like lamps, must burn to shed their light.

Only GOD is Pure Light, Who enlightens the universe without a material substrate or any combination of elements that constitute a reaction. Even revelation, on the other hand, is ‘about’ something other than itself, and is presented in a way that seems to respond to events. All the lights of this world feed, in an analogous process, on materials that are depleted and die, and so, one might assume, are as ephemeral as the fire that produces them. Fire, by its very nature, not only embodies the principles of destruction and transience, but transmits that evanescence to whatever depends on it.

كُلُّ شَيْءٍ هَالِكٌ إِلَّا وَجْهَهُ

### **Everything is perishing except His Countenance. (Q28:88)**

In this parable, however, the fire that powers the star is itself dependent on a **blessed olive tree**. The blessedness of the tree indicates that it is in some way superior even to the star of revelation. Revelations, despite their celestial origins, refer to things on earth, and thus descend to humanity in timed sequence, one era after another. But the olive tree does not die down or fade away; rather it grows and produces fruit, which are the actions of the Garden. The core principle of the Garden is everlasting life – the Life of GOD. We might call it His Countenance. Or, we might say, in terms of Light, that underlying the intermittent light of revelation is the constant light of Truth, alive and growing beyond time.

To emphasize the vitality and validity of the olive tree, we are informed that it has no specific location and is also independent of time, neither rising nor setting, which is what east and west signify for us in this



world. It, too, is a form of light, but one that is the antithesis of fire. The frequent references in the *ḥadīth* literature to the limitless expanse and countless joys of Paradise are yet another way of expressing the contrast of this living Light with the lights produced by fire.

**F. Its oil is almost luminous,**

To understand the oil mentioned here, we must remember that it is derived – pressed, actually – from the fruit of the olive tree, and yet is flammable. The tree does not burn, so its light is not of this world, but its produce does burn, and hence must be something present in this transitory realm. Here we have the paradoxical nature of GOD’s Eternal Light, appearing as it does in transient forms.

The olive tree is a metaphor for truth. But since the truth of revelation has already been symbolically reserved, as it were, by the star, what other truth can there be? It must be something that can be hidden in the lamp and yet essential to its light. And it must be something that almost shines by itself, so that it glistens with the potential for knowing GOD’s Truth. Without further ado, I take this to be the mystical experience that can be tasted prior to or untouched by revelation.

This was the **oil** that had been poured into the soul of the Prophet Muḥammad (may GOD bless him and give him peace) before his elevation to prophethood – the same **oil** that moved him to look for seclusion in the wilderness outside of Makkah and commune with his own spiritual urges in a quest for gnosis. It is this same luminous essence that pervades the writings and teachings of sages and mystics throughout history. We read their writings or study their speeches and are amazed by how close they came to knowing the GOD of revelation without that final spark of His Guidance. There is no denying the verity contained in certain works of wisdom, preserved for humanity by those who never had a more definite light by which to live than the inner beauty of their utterances. As *the Prophet (may GOD bless him and give him peace) said, “Verily in poetry there is wisdom.”* All that was needed was one final touch of **fire**.

**G. though fire does not touch it. Light on Light!**

Revelation, like a star or sun, is fiery. It comes with a painful intensity that can scarcely be borne by mortals.

عَنْ عَائِشَةَ أَنَّ الْحَارِثَ بْنَ هِشَامٍ سَأَلَ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ كَيْفَ يَأْتِيكَ الْوَحْيُ فَقَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ أَحْيَانًا يَأْتِينِي فِي مِثْلِ صَلَاسَةِ الْجَرَسِ وَهُوَ أَشَدُّ عَلَيَّ فَيَفْصِمُ عَلَيَّ وَقَدْ وَعَيْتُ مَا قَالَ وَأَحْيَانًا يَتَمَثَّلُ لِي الْمَلَكُ رَجُلًا فَيُكَلِّمُنِي فَأَعِي مَا يَقُولُ قَالَتْ عَائِشَةُ وَلَقَدْ رَأَيْتُهُ يُنْزَلُ عَلَيْهِ فِي الْيَوْمِ الشَّدِيدِ الْبَرْدِ فَيَفْصِمُ عَنْهُ وَإِنَّ جَبِينَهُ لَيَتَفَصَّدُ عَرَقًا

*From ‘Ā’ishah, [who said] that Al-Hārithab-na Hishām asked the Messenger of AL-LĀH (may GOD bless him and give him peace) how revelation came to him. The Messenger of AL-LĀH (may GOD bless him and give him peace) replied, “Sometimes it comes to me like the tolling of a bell, and that is the hardest on me. Then it departs from me, and I have understood what was said. And sometimes the angel appears to me as a man who speaks to me, and I understand what he says.” ‘Ā’ishah said, “I have seen it come down upon him on a day of severe cold. When it left him, his forehead was soaked with sweat.”*

*(Sunanun-Nasā’ī, Book 11, Ḥadīth 59)*

It is the oil in us, our propensity for wisdom, compassion, and justice, that seeps up into the wick of our character and softens the conflagration of revelation into a steady, gentle flame that neither destroys the lamp nor blinds the eyes of onlookers. Without that inner oil of spiritual profundity and experience, revelation would be like holding a match to gunpowder – a sudden explosion, and destruction everywhere. (We are seeing a lot of these fireworks in the Islamic world nowadays, and the crude oil fuelling much of it is not of the calm, cultured, long-lasting variety.)

Revelation, however, is more than just words. It produces a feeling of urgency, anxiety, and heightened awareness. Together with the inner light, there is psychic heat – the heat that, leaking into this material world, could make one sweat on a cold day. When properly modulated and attended to, we call it conscience – the knowledge of right and wrong, and the witness in our souls to GOD’s primal inquiry of burning importance, **Am I not your Lord? (Q7:172)**

But what about those who have little or no conscience – those whose wicks are dry, their hearts unwarmed by remorse, and their spirits unlit by the Light of GOD? Think of someone whose lack of conscience allowed him to commit the world’s worst crimes with a smile or a shrug. Compare him with the uneasiness of one whose fear of the fire of conscience (i.e., *taqwā*) beset her heart constantly until the day she died. Should they be

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treated equally? Can we let the cries and tears of the victims of the first person go unheeded? Or let the sacrifices and scruples of the second go unrewarded? Can the careless, arrogant, and corrupt escape the mess they made on Earth and retire happily, with the false honours of this world around their shoulders, into quiet, permanent extinction or oblivion, without the touch of fire?

# 19.

## THE FAR SIDE OF HELL



The paradoxical nature of fire should be obvious by now. On the one hand, the Qur'ān constantly refers to it as something close to a synonym for Hell itself. On the other hand, also in the Qur'ān, it receives favourable mention in the parable of Light and in the story of Mūsā's first encounter with revelation. It is clearly a destructive force, but the first reference to it in the Qur'ān is associated with the light of guidance (Q2:17). Unlike the Garden, which grows luxuriantly, fruitfully, and never dies, fire tends to diminishment and exhaustion, yet its inhabitants are said to stay in it forever. How can we reconcile these disparities? Or do they, rather, symbolize a deeper polarity that holds in balance the natural contradictions of spiritual life itself?

The Fire of God must be both a scourge and a blessing, equally painful and necessary. I take that to be the relentless inner smoldering of Conscience – something that is terrible to lose, and yet equally disastrous to feed unchecked. To lose it now is to encounter it later in material form, in Hell. To give it full rein is to become demonically obsessive about always being right. Unmodulated, this fire parches the souls of the fanatics whom

لَا تُبْقِي وَلَا تَذَرُ  
لَوَاحَةَ الْبَشَرِ

**It does not preserve nor let them be, / The scorcher of the skins of men.  
(Q74:28–29)**

We see this ruthless, unscrupulous, inhumane certainty of one's own rightness in the story of Iblīs, the father or headmaster of all the demons who have ever lived as *jinn* or in human form. Indeed, a likely etymology for Satan (*Shaiṭān*), the generic name for all devils, is *shāṭa*, meaning to burn, flare up, or rage.

The rebellion of Iblīs, described on numerous occasions in the Qur'ān, was the action of a proud paragon of devotion who was convinced that

GOD had done him wrong, and that he was right. The wrath of injured pride consumed him as he surveyed the contemptible being, made of clay, who had been placed before him in the sight of GOD. He vowed to wage what he believes to be a holy war against this unjustly elevated upstart. And thus all the crimes of Satan are, despite their obvious evil, emblazoned with the argument of the end justifying the means. All he has to do is prove that GOD has erred, and that his insubordination was in the cause of truth. One could say, in fact, that the devil is in love with truth – his truth. He burns with the vehemence of his righteous anger.

There are, at the other extreme, insensible brutes whose moral compass is so sluggish as to barely register them as human. I am speaking here not of their intelligence, but of empathy for their fellow creatures. These are the psychopathic politicians, corporate executives, and world-class criminals who, with a stroke of the pen or a curl of the lip, command or condone the deaths and suffering of millions of innocents and then say that it was worth it. Their hearts are so hard that nothing but the Fire of GOD can penetrate them, find the good in them, and extract it over a long process described in terms of hooks, spears, bitter fruits, scalding drinks, and vigorous application of the warmth that had been buried and supposed lost within their souls.

وَاللّٰهُ مُخْرِجٌ مَّا كُنْتُمْ تَكْتُمُونَ

**And GOD brings forth what you were wont to hide. (Q2:72)**

With this latter type – the dull, the unfeeling, the blobs of humanity who care nothing for goodness or truth – Hell has its fuel.

فَاتَّقُوا النَّارَ الَّتِي وَقُودُهَا النَّاسُ وَالْحِجَارَةُ أُعِدَّتْ لِلْكَافِرِينَ

**Ward off the Fire whose fuel is men and stones, prepared for the ungrateful. (Q2:24)**

Some of us are devils in human form, and our fire is within. And others of us – the majority – are fuel in human form; our destined portion of the Fire is outside, trying to get in. And thus, with a combination of fury and indifference, the composition of Hell is complete, and the action can begin.

Remember that Iblīs asked for time until the Day of Resurrection, and that human history, the unfolding of time, is the result granted by GOD. As I said earlier, fire too requires time to operate; it subsides and must be replenished.

مَّا وَاهُمْ جَهَنَّمَ كُلَّمَا خَبَتْ زِدْنَاهُمْ سَعِيرًا

**Their place is Hell; whenever it abates, We increase the burning for them. (Q17:97)**

This is a process with a purpose. The Day of Judgement and its aftermath are not meant solely to pass judgement but also to instill judgement. In other words, it is not sufficient for the Divine Plan that you suffer; you must know why you suffer.

وَأَقْسَمُوا بِاللَّهِ جَهْدَ أَيْمَانِهِمْ لَا يَبْعَثُ اللَّهُ مَنْ يَمُوتُ بَلَىٰ وَعْدًا عَلَيْهِ حَقًّا وَلَكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ النَّاسِ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ  
لِيُبَيِّنَ لَهُمُ الَّذِي يُخْتَلِفُونَ فِيهِ وَلِيَعْلَمَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا أَنَّهُمْ كَانُوا كَاذِبِينَ

**They swore by GOD the strongest oaths that GOD would never resurrect the dead. On the contrary, it is a pledge He must fulfill – but most of mankind does not know – / that He might clarify for them what they dispute about and so the ones who had rejected [truth] might know that they were liars. (Q16:38–39)**

AL-LĀH wants this clarification to take place in this world, of course. But if the timing is delayed, for whatever reason ... He still wants it.

يُرِيدُ اللَّهُ لِيُبَيِّنَ لَكُمْ

**AL-LĀH desires to make things clear for you. (Q4:26)**

As GOD's servant in the cause of drastic Enlightenment, the Fire performs this function of making Hell a teachable moment – a lesson that lasts for as long as it takes to learn it. To some, the Fire says, in effect, 'This is what you are.' And to others, it declares, 'This is what you need.' In both cases, the Truth, intended as a blessing, is taken to be a punishment. And it remains a punishment for as long as one fails to see in it the Light of Truth, but rather as something to be avoided. Either way, the Truth, burning or enlightening, retains its absolute nature of being everlasting.

ثُمَّ قِيلَ لِلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا ذُوقُوا عَذَابَ الْخُلْدِ هَلْ تُجْزَوْنَ إِلَّا بِمَا كُنْتُمْ تَكْسِبُونَ  
وَيَسْتَنْبِئُونَكَ أَحَقُّ هُوَ قُلْ إِي وَرَبِّي إِنَّهُ لَحَقٌّ وَمَا أَنْتُمْ بِمُعْجِزِينَ

**Then it is said to those who were oppressors, "Taste the punishment of everlastingness. Are you rewarded other than with what you used to earn? / They ask you, "Is it true?" Say, "By my Master, yes! Indeed it is the truth, and you are not escaping it." (Q10:52–53)**

Eventually, however, the desired clarification comes. How do we know? Because, without fail,

إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَفْعَلُ مَا يُرِيدُ

**Verily AL-LĀH performs what He desires. (Q22:14)**

The question then becomes, ‘What happens when the inhabitants of Hell finally learn their lesson? Does the Qur’ān not constantly refer to **the punishment of everlastingness**, in which they stay forever, and from which there is no escape?

Truth, when we no longer want to escape from it, is no longer a punishment. When we accept the truth as true, we have ceased to be deniers and liars. And only deniers and liars – those who reject the truth – are in Hell forever. We mortals are a changeable lot, going from one spiritual state to another. But Truth, whether we leave it or eventually love it, remains unchanged.

Fire – any fire – performs three tasks. It burns; that is its most basic function. It sheds light, which is why fire is never simply a negative force in the Qur’ān. And finally, it transforms. It substantially changes what it burns, and warms and illuminates what it does not directly touch.

As long as the devils, deniers, and dealers in drugs, destruction, and death remain who they are, they remain where they are. A bonfire is made over them to ‘honour’ their undying resistance. They could, on the other hand, accept the truth of who they have been and Who GOD has always been, and immediately put themselves out of their misery, literally (not in the sense of dying, however, for there is no death in the Everafter). When the truth finally reaches to the core of their being, they themselves become truthful, and belong with AL-LĀH, The Absolutely True.

I realize, for many Muslims, that this view of the Fire may seem strange or even heterodox. But not only does it make sense as the most complete reconciliation of the heat of Hell with the warmth of GOD’s all-consuming Love, there is enormous support for it within the Qur’ān and the *ḥadīth* literature.

وَيَوْمَ يَحْشُرُهُمْ جَمِيعًا يَا مَعْشَرَ الْجِنَّ قَدِ اسْتَكْبَرْتُمْ مِنَ الْإِنْسِ وَقَالَ  
أَوْلِيَاؤُهُمْ مِنَ الْإِنْسِ رَبَّنَا اسْتَمْتَعَ بَعْضُنَا بِبَعْضٍ وَبَلَّغْنَا أَجَلَنَا الَّذِي  
أَجَلْتَ لَنَا قَالَ النَّارُ مَثْوَاكُمْ خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا إِلَّا مَا شَاءَ اللَّهُ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ حَكِيمٌ  
عَلِيمٌ

On the Day He gathers all of them, [AL-LĀH will say], “O Assembly of the *jinn*, you asked too much from humans.” Their associates among humanity will say, “Our Master, some of us made use of others, and we reached the term that You appointed for us.” He will say, “The Fire is your everlasting home, except for what AL-LĀH has willed.” Verily your Lord is Wise, Cognizant.” (Q6:128)

Is Hell unconditionally everlasting? No; such an attribute belongs to GOD alone. Hell, which like every other piece of creation never had an independent existence, continues only by GOD’s Will. The same applies to Paradise, of course.

قَامَا الَّذِينَ شَقُّوا فِي النَّارِ لَهُمْ فِيهَا زَفِيرٌ وَشَهِيقٌ  
خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا مَا دَامَتِ السَّمَاوَاتُ وَالْأَرْضُ إِلَّا مَا شَاءَ رَبُّكَ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ  
فَعَّالٌ لِّمَا يُرِيدُ  
وَأَمَّا الَّذِينَ سُعِدُوا فِي الْجَنَّةِ خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا مَا دَامَتِ السَّمَاوَاتُ  
وَالْأَرْضُ إِلَّا مَا شَاءَ رَبُّكَ عَطَاءٌ غَيْرَ مَجْذُودٍ

As for the wretched, they are in the Fire; their portion there is sighs and sobs, / and there they stay for the duration of the heavens and the earth, except for what your Lord has willed. Indeed your Lord performs what He desires. / As for the blessed, they are in the Garden, staying there for the duration of the heavens and the earth, except for what your Lord has willed – a never-ending gift. (Q11:106–108)

Notice the difference between Paradise, whose continuance, however conditional, is described as a **never-ending gift**, and Hell, the description of which ends with **Indeed your Lord performs what He desires**. Let us remind ourselves again what He desires.

يُرِيدُ اللَّهُ لِيُبَيِّنَ لَكُمْ وَيَهْدِيَكُمْ  
وَاللَّهُ يُرِيدُ أَنْ يَتُوبَ عَلَيْكُمْ  
يُرِيدُ اللَّهُ أَنْ يُخَفِّفَ عَنْكُمْ

**GOD wants to make things clear for you and guide you. / GOD wants to turn to you, relenting. / GOD wants to make things easy for you. (Q4:26–28)**

With this Divine Program in mind, the only reason for a believer to be in Hell is that GOD’s Justice demands it. But then what happens?



عَنْ أَبِي سَعِيدٍ الْخُدْرِيِّ رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُ أَنَّ النَّبِيَّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ قَالَ إِذَا دَخَلَ أَهْلُ الْجَنَّةِ الْجَنَّةَ وَأَهْلُ النَّارِ النَّارَ يَقُولُ اللَّهُ مَنْ كَانَ فِي قَلْبِهِ مِثْقَالُ حَبَّةٍ مِنْ خَرْدَلٍ مِنْ إِيْمَانٍ فَأُخْرِجُوهُ فَيُخْرِجُونَ قَدْ امْتَحِشُوا وَعَادُوا حُمَمًا فَيُلْقَوْنَ فِي نَهْرِ الْحَيَاةِ فَيَنْبُثُونَ كَمَا تَنْبُثُ الْحَبَّةُ فِي حَمِيلِ السَّيْلِ أَوْ قَالَ حَمِيَّةِ السَّيْلِ وَقَالَ النَّبِيُّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ أَلَمْ تَرَوْا أَنَّهَا تَنْبُثُ صَفَرَاءَ مُلْتَوِيَةً

*From Abī Saʿīdinil-Khudrīyī (may God be pleased with him), [who said] that the Prophet (may GOD bless him and give him peace) said, “When the people of the Garden have entered the Garden, and the people of the Fire have entered the Fire, AL-LĀH will say, ‘Take out whoever has in his heart the weight of a mustard seed of faith.’ So they are taken out burnt and come back charred. Then they are cast into the river of Life, and there they grow like a seed on the refuse of a flood (or he said, “the margin of a flood”).” And the Prophet (may GOD bless him and give him peace) said, “Have you not seen it shoot up yellow and twisted?”*

*(Ṣaḥīḥul-Bukhārī, Book 81, Ḥadīth 149)*

عَنْ أَبِي سَعِيدٍ الْخُدْرِيِّ قَالَ قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ مَا مُجَادَلَةٌ أَحَدِكُمْ فِي الْحَقِّ يَكُونُ لَهُ فِي الدُّنْيَا بِأَشَدَّ مُجَادَلَةً مِنَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ لِرَبِّهِمْ فِي إِخْوَانِهِمُ الَّذِينَ أَدْخَلُوا النَّارَ قَالَ يَقُولُونَ رَبَّنَا إِخْوَانُنَا كَانُوا يُصَلُّونَ مَعَنَا وَيَصُومُونَ مَعَنَا وَيَحُجُّونَ مَعَنَا فَأَدْخَلْتَهُمُ النَّارَ قَالَ فَيَقُولُ أَذْهَبُوا فَأُخْرِجُوا مَنْ عَرَفْتُمْ مِنْهُمْ قَالَ فَيَأْتُونَهُمْ فَيَعْرِفُونَهُمْ بِصُورِهِمْ فَمِنْهُمْ مَنْ أَخَذَتْهُ النَّارُ إِلَى أَنْصَافٍ سَاقِيَةٍ وَمِنْهُمْ مَنْ أَخَذَتْهُ إِلَى كَعْبِيَّتِهِ فَيُخْرِجُونَهُمْ فَيَقُولُونَ رَبَّنَا قَدْ أَخْرَجْنَا مَنْ أَمَرْتَنَا قَالَ وَيَقُولُ أَخْرِجُوا مَنْ كَانَ فِي قَلْبِهِ وَزْنُ دِينَارٍ مِنَ الْإِيْمَانِ ثُمَّ قَالَ مَنْ كَانَ فِي قَلْبِهِ وَزْنُ نِصْفِ دِينَارٍ حَتَّى يَقُولَ مَنْ كَانَ فِي قَلْبِهِ وَزْنُ ذَرَّةٍ

*From Abī Saʿīdinil-Khudrīyī, who said, “The Messenger of AL-LĀH (may GOD bless him and give him peace) said, ‘Not one of you will be more disputatious for his rights in this world than the believers before their Lord for their brethren who were made to enter the Fire. They will say, “Our Lord, our brethren used to pray with us and fast with us and perform the pilgrimage with us, but You made them enter the Fire.” So He will say, “Go and take whom you recognize among them.” They will*

*come to them and recognize them by their appearance. Among them will be those whom the Fire seized halfway up their shins, and those whom it seized up to their ankles. So they take them out, and then they say, "Our Lord, we took out whom You ordered us to." Then He will say, "Take out whoever has in his heart the weight of a coin of faith," then "Whoever has in his heart the weight of half of a coin," until He says, "Whoever has in his heart the weight of an atom."'''*

*(Sunanun-Nasā'i, Book 47, Ḥadīth 26)*

These are not the only traditions of this sort, but these two will suffice. There are gradations and developments in Hell that enable those present to leave it, and for some to emerge before others. The potential for another life is there, like seeds, and faith is at the heart of that potential. One may conclude, therefore, that those who remain are not yet ready to be broken open and grow. However, as I said much earlier in Chapter 1, we are all, by nature, believers – **the nature of AL-LĀH by which He made humanity. There is no alteration in what GOD creates. (Q30:30)** In other words, our original connection with GOD can never be erased. Those who rediscover this core truth are saved. Those who deny it remain for as long their denial persists – forever, if necessary. The failure to identify with GOD's Internal and Eternal Mercy is precisely what keeps them there.

وَلَا تَتَيْسَّرُوا مِنْ رَوْحِ اللَّهِ إِنَّهُ لَا يَبِينُ مِنْ رَوْحِ اللَّهِ إِلَّا الْقَوْمَ  
الْكَافِرُونَ

**And despair not of the Mercy of AL-LĀH. Indeed no one abandons hoping for the Mercy of AL-LĀH but people who reject it. (Q12:87)**

And so we read:

وَاللَّهُ لَا يَهْدِي الْقَوْمَ الظَّالِمِينَ  
أُولَئِكَ جَزَاؤُهُمْ أَنَّ عَلَيْهِمْ لَعْنَةَ اللَّهِ وَالْمَلَائِكَةِ وَالنَّاسِ أَجْمَعِينَ  
خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا لَا يُخَفَّفُ عَنْهُمْ الْعَذَابُ وَلَا هُمْ يُنْظَرُونَ  
إِلَّا الَّذِينَ تَابُوا مِنْ بَعْدِ ذَلِكَ وَأَصْلَحُوا فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ

**And GOD guides not the people who do wrong. / Their reward is that upon them is the curse of GOD, and of the angels, and of all mankind, / abiding there; the punishment is not reduced for them, nor do they gain reprieve, / except for those who have repented after that and made amends, then surely GOD is Pardoning, Compassionate. (Q3:86–89)**

## SELF IS HELL

*Self is hell. I write these lines  
As a cry for help, for I've seen the signs  
That say, "NO EXIT," "FEEL FREE  
TO SCRAWL UPON THE WALLS" of Me.*

*However much I dig or shove,  
My tools will always be self-love.  
Change the name, the shade, the shape —  
It's I for an I, and no escape.*

*By radio, road, or affiliation,  
I turn and turn, but it's always a station  
Where the truth is capped like the end of a nerve,  
Or the arrows all point to the same "Self Serve."*

*The will to question 'Me' and 'My'  
Could be a diamond, but if I die  
Within this 'Mine,' will I turn to coal  
And give up the Light for the dust of my soul?*

*"Add fuel to your fire; let your dreams burn on!  
(In these few final hours, before the Dawn)."  
They speak for the cold and the dark, no doubt;  
But where will I go when they put Me out?*

*When Day arrives, dreams must die,  
Except one dream of clear blue sky.  
On Our waking up, I will know very well  
That heaven is all, and self is hell.*

## 20.

# SECOND SYNOPSIS



28. Faith is active affirmation of the facts and values we all need to build our sense of self and world.
29. One of GOD's Names, The Faithful, conveys the cosmic reality of faith as the act of all that lives.
30. Faith is creative. It guides the making of the stories that sustain us, and of the lies that delude us.
31. As The First Believer, GOD affirms by faith the authenticity, value, and beauty of His creation.
32. What we believe to be the truth is actually the truth about us, and thus a record due to be judged.
33. Our real faith is not just a set of propositions, but what we actually live for and would die for.
34. The ultimately vast gap between our 'truth' and the Truth will be intolerable without His Mercy.
35. An authentic, comprehensive faith in GOD precludes hatred, bigotry, or narrow views.
36. Our compulsion to believe in our own free will is an echo, and only an echo, of GOD's Freedom.
37. The Will of GOD subsumes, without contradiction, by His Absolute Power, our individual wills.
38. There is no higher nor more ecstatic human freedom than to be as one with GOD's Will.
39. The basis of human morality is not free will, which is ultimately illusory, but free judgement.
40. Insofar as we believe ourselves free from GOD's Will, we will be judged according to that belief.
41. When one chooses to go astray, the Will of GOD enabling him to do so is termed 'misguidance.'
42. The process of GOD's misguidance and subsequent judgement is analogous to how *karma* works.

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43. Heaven, like other absolutes, would be meaningless to us without its opposite. Thus Hell ‘exists.’
  44. Hell is the abode of those who remorselessly choose the abyss or its many forms of incoherence.
  45. The first step in freeing oneself from Hell is to recognize that one is there for good, and rightly so.
  46. Hell exists to make us feel GOD’s Truth, acknowledge His Law, and accept our responsibility.
  47. These are the functions of that inner fire known as conscience. Conscience is the Fire of GOD.
  48. Even in Hell, the Fire of GOD represents His Love, but in an intensified form we call His Wrath.
  49. Other than for GOD and His angels, all illumination requires a touch of fire to be enlightening.
  50. The heat, stress, and urgency in revelation are almost unbearable for mortals.
  51. A burning urge to be always right drove Satan to rebel against GOD and make the Fire his home.
  52. There are others whose souls are so hard and cold that nothing but the Fire can change them.
  53. The Fire remains a punishment only for as long as its denizens refuse to accept the truth in it.
  54. GOD will finally accomplish what He intended for all creatures – to reunite them in His Light.

## 21.

# CHOOSING FRAMES, AND THOSE CHOSEN



A frame is a conceptual boundary that, intentionally or unconsciously, explicitly or implicitly, is drawn around a discourse to limit the range of ideas and images admitted to that discourse. Just as we are all naturally believers, selectively affirming the facts and values that maintain our identity and point of view, so too do we feel compelled to frame that view, to build a mental membrane around our world to keep our favoured facts and values in and the unwanted ones out.

In the same way that we rarely imagine seeing our own skins from the inside, the frames we use are rarely visible to us unless we deliberately recreate them by acts of analysis or introspection. The more comfortable we are inside a particular frame, the less likely we are to see it or even admit that it exists. Only when a frame is unfamiliar or foreign to us – usually because it belongs to someone else – does some of its outline appear, and only then are we acutely aware of how arbitrary and unreflecting a frame can be.

Consequently, the most productive arguments in theology and philosophy are those that expose and examine the basic assumptions and unmentioned starting points that constitute the frames of the discussion. A debate about the existence of God, for example, should not get under way until the disputants have clarified what each of them means by ‘exist’ and ‘God.’ The latter term, in particular, might have particular connotations and emotional tones for one party that had never even been considered by the other party. An atheist, for example, might be vehemently opposed to an anthropomorphic Father-Deity and wonder why his opponent cannot see how logically absurd that image is, while the theist who equates divinity with the underlying principle of all life would be equally disappointed by the blindness of denying something so intuitively obvious. If they do not explicitly identify their different frames and clarify the definitions of

the terms they are using, they could continue to talk past each other at cross-purposes until doomsday ... only to discover that each of them was both right and wrong.

In the above examples, a frame operates at two different levels – what it claims to include or exclude, and what it effectively includes or excludes. It may claim, for instance, to include anything it defines as rational, and to exclude whatever it deems irrational. The atheist would claim that ‘God’ is excluded not arbitrarily, but rather for impeccable reasons, namely that the concept is adhered to blindly, on emotional or superstitious grounds. This assumption begs the question of how rationality is to be defined and whether ‘God’ is by definition something in which rationality plays no part. In effect, the stated frame of rationality is channelling its contents into another, unstated frame that limits the meanings of rationality and God in ways that someone utilizing other frames may be compelled to accept on the basis of this prior claim to rationality. Another implicit frame is the unquestioned legitimacy of making any form of rationality the sole determining factor in authenticating a person’s faith in or attachment to a particular concept. And a third unstated frame is the relevance or validity of the very idea of ‘choosing’ frames. The burden of calling attention to these unstated frames is left to the supposedly illogical theist, who is handicapped from the start by her imputed irrationality.

Conversely, a theist could develop a frame around the concept of respect for the mysterious and ineffable source of life in the universe. Anything that connotes the harmonious, nourishing, and sensitive elements of general spirituality would be admitted, but the legal, authoritative, rational, or judgemental aspects of religion jar against this reassuring side of divinity, and hence would be either excluded or ignored (the latter course being a mild way of ensuring exclusion). A certain character is associated with ‘God,’ and constitutes the implicit frame that discourages strict or rigorous versions of faith. This too begs questions, such as the underlying conditions and relative importance of long-term harmony and wholesomeness, and how we decide what is reassuring when different individuals are reassured by different things. And once again, the whole question of our ‘choosing’ frames is set aside if we operate in an egocentric, individualistic, ‘freedom’-tilted framework from the start.

Can we avoid framing the points we make in any discourse? No, we cannot; every one of us, myself included, has blind spots and points of view that inevitably generate frames. All we can do is try our best to elucidate what we believe our frames to be. We have to be as thorough and

honest as possible in consciously identifying the social, cultural, and spiritual backgrounds that reveal themselves, usually without our conscious assent, in what we say, think, and believe.

To illustrate how framing tends to work, let me present a table setting out conversion and/or non-conversion to another frame, the two basic frames being a monotheistic religion and modern secular atheism. The details within the table – columns 2-4 – are not meant to include all possible reasons and frames for these four groups of persons. Since every person’s character and background are unique, there is virtually no limit to what I could offer here.

PERSON	RATIONALE	CLAIMED FRAME	EFFECTIVE FRAME
1. Religious, content with religion	1.1 Atheism leaves us with an empty, meaningless, and hopeless universe, devoid of spirit, grace, and respect for our forefathers’ cultural traditions. God not only answers our prayers for love and guidance, He answers our need, through religion, for social stability, communal bonds, strong families, unselfish morality, and inner peace as we face destruction, disease, and death.	1.2 Divine knowledge of what is best for humanity, handed down through the wisdom and practical experience of generations of prophets, scholars, saints, and righteous men and women who lived noble, productive lives	1.3 Traditions, ideas, and emotional reactions that acquire a patina of sanctity by unquestioning repetition; automatic judgements of the real and the good based on a fear of being seen as rebellious or innovative; antipathy to change
2. Religious, seeking atheism	2.1 People are good, not because of their religion, but in spite of it. Whatever positive features religion has are outweighed by its negatives. The demands, restrictions, anti-rationalism, and overall incoherence of religion are intolerable.	2.2 Non-partisan, universal ethics; freedom of the individual to choose his/her own way of life without compulsion; modern secular values	2.3 Self-centred narratives that relate all values to the independent will and temporal, conditional authority, thus dismissing divine or transcendent powers and realities



PERSON	RATIONALE	CLAIMED FRAME	EFFECTIVE FRAME
3. Atheist, content with atheism	3.1 Religions are instruments of social control by oppressive, outdated patriarchal hierarchies; it is our duty to reject them and eliminate them from humanity's future. God is a lie invented to legitimize and maintain these immoral relics of our ignorant past. Atheism frees us from the indignity of grovelling to myths and superstitions, allowing us to pursue our true good.	3.2 Reason based on the empirical, falsifiable findings of modern science; morality based on equality for all, respect for life and diversity, and a track record of progress in standards of living and lifestyles	3.3 Exclusion of theological reasoning; relegation of faith in God to quaint cultural scenery or quirky characters; permissive morality provisionally informed by current social norms, state power, and the status quo of disputable legislation
4. Atheist, seeking religion	4.1 The human spirit thirsts for higher meaning and purpose, and though we cannot escape our bodily needs and private identities in this life, we should never let ourselves be defined by them, let alone make them the measure of all our values. True growth is toward eternal insights and ever higher heavens of transcendence.	4.2 The discipline of spiritual training and devotion to a greater Reality than the flat epicureanism of the modern secular ego and its petty quests for emotional comfort zones	4.3 Disdain for the complex social and cultural environments that tie people to the mundane; disregard for the psychic poverty and emotional hunger underlying and undermining spirituality

There is nothing definitive or precise about the contents of this table. My purpose, rather, is simply to indicate how the same issue – religion versus atheism – can be framed in various ways, all of which appear valid to their proponents and one-sided to their critics. God can be taken as a frame that includes everything, because God creates all things, or that includes nothing of truth or value, if God is considered as a fabrication. In the former case, God puts everything in its place; in the latter case, God is assigned a dishonourable place in a greater frame called Reason or Justice.

The aim of this book, of course, is to unfold the former view – that GOD is The Ultimate Frame – insofar as He encompasses everything. Underlying this, however, is my concern for recognizing that Ultimate Frame, regardless of the term we use.

Critics may complain that by naming that Ultimate Frame GOD I have already fabricated a frame that is no longer ultimate, but biased towards monotheistic religion. Fair enough. I accept that accusation as possibly well-intentioned and just. I would only add that there is no term that escapes some sort of bias, including “Ultimate Frame” itself, with its connotation of being just another mental construct in the universe of intellectual things that are conceived by human minds. When I say “GOD,” I mean not only something that surpasses all our terminology, imagination, and experience, but also One Who creates and frames our terms, images, and inner life in His – The Ultimate Framer. I want my use of “GOD” to be as infinitely beyond as anything or anyone can be. If “GOD” is not the word for that, I welcome alternative terms like the ones that I have already used (e.g., The Personal-Suprapersonal Absolute). “GOD,” in any case, gets the job done with only one syllable and three letters, so I will continue to use that term.

For me, therefore, GOD is the One Who creates, includes, and yet transcends all our conscious or unconscious acts of framing. He does this through a process experienced by certain chosen persons:

وَمَا يَنْطِقُ عَنِ الْهَوَىٰ  
إِنْ هُوَ إِلَّا وَحْيٌ يُوحَىٰ

**He [Muḥammad] does not speak from inclination. It is no less than an inspired revelation. (Q53:3-4)**

It may be that you do not accept the claims of inspired persons. But GOD also performs this ultimate framing naturally, as The Creator: **And GOD created you and what you do. (Q37:96)** And, finally, He does this by simply being GOD. This will need some explanation, and so I return to the examples in the table on the previous page.

**1.1** For a large part of the world’s population, the traditional monotheistic God is the ideal frame for supplying our meanings, fulfilling our needs, and dispelling our fears. The prospect of a greater Reality, yet unrevealed, enriches the meanings that we presently possess. The ever-increasing challenge of gratitude for what we have already received stills the urge to acquire more material things, and our dread of death and other

adversities are likewise laid to rest amid our wonder at GOD's amazing powers of healing and conjuring life out of the unlikeliest corners of the universe.

**1.2** The Omniscience and Omnipotence of GOD provide a natural frame for humility and patience. By contemplating Infinity and Eternity, two aspects of Divine Transcendence, we find our pride and haste to be among the silliest of mankind's many short-sighted mistakes.

**1.3** Over time, the original expansiveness of the God-frame is constricted to serve particular worldly interests. In every religion, the clergy appropriate God's Knowledge as their own, and the rulers title themselves the Shadow of God or dress themselves in the Divine Right of Kings to consolidate their hold on power. The wealthy, meanwhile, claim their riches to be the sign of their being blessed by God. In all such cases, the concept of God is imperceptibly shrink-wrapped to fit the corrupt and puny figures of people who pose as savants, saints, leaders, or heroes, exempt from questioning.

**2.1** If all good comes from GOD, then how is it that atheists can also be good people and do obviously good deeds? The answer, of course, is that GOD works through all His creation, including atheists, whether they believe in Him or not. Faith in GOD, moreover, is but one of the ways we reveal ourselves to Him, and it too has many levels and dimensions, including a pseudo-atheism that nonetheless believes in moral good (one of GOD's manifestations) and a more thorough atheism that dismisses the concepts of good and evil altogether in favour of some limited manifestation of divinity such as pure rationality. This last version, of course, is absurd at a practical level; even single-celled organisms are motivated to seek some form of survival (their 'good') and to avoid some form of destruction (harm, or 'evil').

People tend to conflate God with religion, and think that if they can denounce religion then they are done with God. But the alternate ideals that they propose, such as freedom or justice, are divine qualities. In other words, they need GOD to debunk religion. They need GOD, period.

**2.2** Intolerance is found in many forms, some of them mandated by established religions. Secularism can also be intolerant. Whatever the shape of the social space in which tolerance permits diversity and intolerance sets limits, the practical result displays to us the 'religion' of that

society. Because the balance between the freedom to differ and the need to conform is constantly being tested and negotiated in society, absolutes such as justice, freedom, solidarity, and efficiency are continuously invoked and discussed. The clashes between these absolutes and their consequent compartmentalization disguise the Reality of their having One Source Who manifests Himself in various aspects according to our desires and demands.

**2.3** While secular frames start out proclaiming the welfare of all mankind, their adherents soon find that humanity is too diverse and changeable to provide any stable notion of an absolute good. They finally resort to what is clearest and most consistent in this fluid mass of wishes – themselves – and find there an urgency and immediacy that a theist would only grant to God. And what arbitrates among these disparate selves, once a transcendent absolute has been discarded? – the governing powers of the age. In this way, values are first atomized and then politicized, and ethics are transformed into yet another platform in the overarching struggle for power. Without GOD, the absolutes we thought we knew become playing cards in yet another version of the survival of the strongest and richest.

**3.1** Atheist critics of religion tend to assume that religion can only be a tool for justifying oneself and excusing one's domination of others. Such critiques ignore the obvious historical fact that most of the religious role models in all cultures exemplify the opposite traits of meekness, self-denial, and long-suffering. But then the critics get to work to show how such exemplars are used to instill passivity in believers, or that they do not measure up to our more exacting current standards. However one frames the matter, another frame can be adduced to make the initial frame look small and inadequate. Atheists might prefer an endless and fruitless squabble over which frame (i.e., god) is supreme. But the theist, faced with an infinite regression of ever-grander conceptual frames, calls a halt with some version of *AL-LĀHU Akbar* – GOD is The Greatest (Frame of all).

**3.2** GOD comprehends not only Reason but also the reasons why rationalists adore Reason – its clarity, consistency, and universality, among other things. But Reason, too, has its limits; it cannot, by its very nature, prescribe the good or motivate the will. Ideal rationality is dispassionate, mathematical, and indefinitely repetitive – a conceptual machine, in other words. And for this reason, Reason would never be attractive if it did not offer yet another feature that modern man finds irresistible – power. The

claims of modern science carry so much weight precisely because of something that irrationally motivates so many of its proponents, namely the power to build, change, and destroy things. In this world, as we have seen with Fire, no blessing or gift as great as Reason comes as an unalloyed good or evil. Its tool-like or machine-like properties are precisely why Reason can never be the Ultimate Frame.

**3.3** By setting mathematical reasoning as the gold standard for all reason, today's rationalists end up excluding not only much of the rough-and-ready calculation by which we navigate ethical dilemmas and social situations, among other things, but also the kind of thought that examines such matters as why Reason is itself an absolute, on the one hand, and why it does not suffice, on the other hand, for all the other absolutes by which human beings live their lives.<sup>W</sup> Philosophy, especially logic and epistemology, and theology go much further in exploring the limits of human reasoning, but critics of faith do not generally expound on how their own criticisms are faith-free (and they are not) or what the logical limits of reasoning are. And in seeking freedom from all principles except those of empirical science, they not only unchain and legitimize the powers that control them, namely their desires and the mores of the moment, but they also continue to unknowingly submit to the Absolute Freedom of the One Who includes their delusions in His Plan.

**W**

The truth of every formal system of meaning, such as arithmetic or logic, cannot be demonstrated within that system. Each language owes its ultimate validation to a higher metalanguage, according to Tarski's undefinability theorem (from Wikipedia). Or in Qur'anic terms:

وَفَوْقَ كُلِّ ذِي عِلْمٍ عَلَيْهِ

**Over every knower is [another] one who knows. (Q12:76)**

**4.1** When one seeks the highest, the best, the truest, and so on beyond the bound of words, one is in engaged, knowingly or not, willingly or not, in a quest for GOD. This aim consumes the seeker, because in many ways the goal is greater than the erring aim of any one marksman. It has motivated and inspired the hearts of those who yearn for GOD throughout history, and long before history. There is nothing new or original about it, except that our origins are, in some sense, in it; striving for the ultimate is what makes us human. The seed of GOD, planted in the breast of every

human being, will inevitably take root and grow, however parched and hard and hostile the soil may be. GOD is not to be denied.

**4.2** You may claim to do all this, and do it better, without the ‘God’ concept. Fine; you owe Him the best you can do in any case. But when you have done your best, and fallen short as all of us must fall at last, cast your imagination past that box of thought you constructed for yourself out of nothing but your own experience and knowledge and consider what you could have done within a greater frame, drawing upon the mental, emotional, and spiritual resources of those who dreamed higher and reached farther than you. Consider the shape and force of what you do not know, compared to what you do. Then, perhaps, you may start to realize what the concept of ‘God’ does for those like you who aim, not for the stars, but for The Maker of stars and concepts alike. The greatest discipline is of those who transcend their own discipline, and confess their failings that they might be helped to go beyond them. For no one enters this world, or leaves it, alone. How foolish is it to refuse help when it was always and sincerely intended to help you!

وَإِذْ قُلْنَا لِلْمَلَائِكَةِ اسْجُدُوا لِآدَمَ فَسَجَدُوا إِلَّا إِبْلِيسَ قَالَ أَأَسْجُدُ لِمَنْ خَلَقْتُ طِينًا

**And [consider] when We told the angels, “Prostrate yourselves to Ādam;” so they did, except Iblīs, who said, “Shall I prostrate myself to one whom You created out of clay?” (Q17:61)**

**4.3** The angels have been commissioned to devote themselves to our service, symbolized by their prostration. In serving us, they are serving GOD, and thus are they blessed. Their superiority to us not only does not exempt them from such service, but is paradoxically confirmed by it. Iblīs, the original devil, cannot comprehend this point, and is thus condemned to a career of pride, contempt, and frustration. He cannot accept the holy irony in how GOD has ordered His creation, and so espouses evil as the logical response to a good that defies his sense of what is right. Knowing that he will fail, he fights nonetheless, almost as a point of honour and principle (though ego is his real motivation).

His failure to understand leads Satan to the disdain and disregard I mentioned as the final frame of those who seek the truth with what they think are the best of intentions, except that they are dragged down by pride. That is the downfall of the purist and fanatic – an inability to ‘let go and let God.’ To serve GOD and accept His discipline, we must learn to serve

in a world that defies our attempts to understand it and control it. It is a messy and confusing place, and identifying ourselves with it will certainly immerse us in its filth and falsehood. But to condemn it, ignore it, and work against it, let alone dismiss and scoff at its Creator, is to condemn, ignore, and destroy our own selves, for we are part of it, and have been imparted some spark of the Divine with which to transform it and give it a greater frame. This is a gift greater than ourselves. Rather, it is the gift that we become by giving of ourselves.

## 22.

# SAFETY, THE FAILED HYPOTHESIS



Stop signs have been a traditional part of our cultural landscape for so long that we have forgotten to ask the most important questions: Do we actually need to stop at intersections anymore? Do we really believe in safety? Or are we just going through the motions?

Professor E. Z. de Bunkre, a scholar of human behaviour, believes that it is time to move on. “Stopping is no longer a viable option in our fast-paced, modern society. Safety is dead, but we still haven’t managed to bury it yet.”

“A poll taken in 2018 shows that only 8 percent of scientists believe in personal safety. Another 17 percent admit that there could be something in the universe that corresponds to safety, but only in the sense of a supreme state of being OK,” added Professor de Bunkre.

“We now have enough scientific data and models to determine whether safety is a viable hypothesis or not. Believers say that safety affects every aspect of their lives, and gives them hope for a better future. As scientists, however, we must determine whether this faith is warranted by the evidence.

“If safety were real, it would produce real effects in the material world. Safety has particular attributes that should be empirically testable, particularly since believers say that safety is not localized but is available everywhere. So when we look for it inside a box, no matter how small, we should either find it, thus confirming its existence, or not find it, thus refuting the existence of safety.”<sup>3</sup>

“If safety exists, then there must be something in the universe that is completely safe. But material science demonstrates that there is nothing

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<sup>3</sup> Victor J. Stenger, *God, the Failed Hypothesis: How Science Shows that God Does Not Exist*, p. 27.



that cannot be altered, broken, or damaged in some way. Therefore, safety is an illusion.

“Furthermore, long-term experiments have observed the effects of so-called safe groups in comparison with a control group of unsafe participants who did not come to a complete stop at intersections. After 15 years of observation, no statistically significant difference in health or wellbeing could be discerned between the safe and unsafe arms of the study. Other trials have examined various acts deemed safe and could not detect any outcome that was not explainable in purely physical terms such as mass, volume, velocity, and chemical composition.

“People who stop at intersections have not been found to be any more moral or honest than those who inch forward through intersections without stopping. There is, consequently, no correlation between faith in safety and ordinary ethical behaviour. Rather, the opposite has been indicated in several studies; believers in safety are more likely to engage in patriarchal acts such as home schooling, forcible restraint (i.e., seat belts), and child abuse (e.g., spanking). Researchers surmise that believers are compensating for their inadequacies in other areas by being extra-scrupulous at stop signs.”

When asked whether his own laboratory work was safe or not, or whether the very concept of safety was now meaningless, Professor de Bunkre replied that this type of questioning was irrelevant, as it had no relation to scientific fact.

The final question, on a personal note, was about his own wife and children, and whether their safety was no longer a concern for him. The professor declined to answer, only adding that he was busy preparing for next month’s conference, entitled ‘Love: Another Failed Hypothesis.’



The purpose of my parody here is to draw out the fallacies in how scientific physicalists frame their claims to disprove the existence of GOD. Some may object to certain features of the analogy, and even point out that it is wrong to say that safety cannot be detected or measured. Indeed, a whole industry has been built around quantifying and reifying safety. But that is precisely my point. Any abstract absolute, such as safety or love or knowledge, can be shrunk, concretized, and re-presented in such a way as to foster the illusion that the subject matter is totally covered. And there are practical pressures to do just that – to reify and monetize our intrinsic

goods into tradable goods, or to dismiss them if they cannot be marketed in some form or another.

In this way, safety is no longer an ideal with a generally accepted meaning or denotation and a vast cloud of connotations, which is normal for any absolute, but a quantifiable object defined in terms of, say, consecutive man-hours without loss or accident, or a ratio of events per population. The innately known but unarticulated aspect of its value is what motivates us to prioritize safety. Challenged to put it into practice, however, we will inevitably reify it. When we do so, we no longer ‘know’ it directly or innately, even though we can tabulate and map it by various measures.

Making practicality and measurability, let alone commercial applications, as the sole criteria of truth has long-term, undefinable effects on that ineffable and priceless entity we call the soul. If we insist on the quantitative alone, then safety is a ratio, love is sexual activity, knowledge is facts, beauty is popularity, and truth is the results of the latest poll. Then a newborn child is an expense or, worse yet, an excrescence, and a human being is a consumer, a unit of production, and potentially cannon fodder or a trafficable commodity. Once the spirit of anything is excluded, then what remains is a quantifiable and possibly even lucrative carcass.

To make sense of any frame, we reduce it. But then we tend to forget that it has been reduced, and begin to identify the original concept with our reification of it. This happens in all fields, and with every type of faith. Believers in GOD do this with God, and make him a god, an idol. (See my note about these three terms in Chapter 1, Text Box B.) Initially filled with the fervour of the Absolute, they expend their faith on ever more constricted manifestations of His Infinity. There can be no finality, closure, or sense of possession with The Eternally Open. So followers of even a monotheistic faith will tend to over-invest in and sacralize its concrete manifestations, one or another aspect of their religion. This happened to the Jews as they began to consider themselves as having an exclusive and racially based eternal relationship to God. The Christians elevated the Prophet ‘Īsā (peace be upon him) to divine rank as a coeternal Son of God. And the Muslims followed suit in various ways, from a purportedly primordial Light of Muḥammad (may GOD bless him and give him peace) or the infallible and sinless descendants of ‘Alī to the belief that the Qur’ān, the Word of GOD, is uncreated.<sup>x</sup>

This is not to deny the outstanding history of the people of Isrā’īl, nor the sanctity of ‘Īsā, nor the lasting validity of the Qur’ān. But neither the Jewish nation, nor ‘Īsā, nor the Qur’ān is GOD. The Jews are a vessel of God’s blessing because GOD willed it so. ‘Īsā became a model for humanity because GOD chose him. The Qur’ān is a holy book because of GOD

## X

Belief in an uncreated Qur'ān has been a bedrock of orthodox Sunnī theology for over a thousand years, and is therefore not to be dismissed lightly. The doctrine was formulated to guard Muslims' trust in the unchanging infallibility of the Qur'ān, and so deserves, at the very least, the respect that any time-tested basis for firm monotheistic faith should have.

Considering the ferocity of former debates over this issue, moreover, many scholars have declared it to be one that a believer should avoid discussing altogether, or one that will at any rate have no substantial impact on the fundamentals of his/her faith. And so I have relegated more detailed treatment of this issue to Appendix 1.

If I were to listen only to such scholars, however, this book would never be written. My faith demands that I push my intellect ahead of it, forcing it to look into matters that, once illuminated, will make it stronger, in keeping with the command of the Qur'ān itself (20:114) **Say, "My Lord, add more to what I know."**

speaking through it. GOD Himself is The Source and Author of all holiness. Neither the Jewish nation, nor Jesus, nor the Qur'ān is authoritative by itself. But when one of them is attacked by casting reasonable doubt on its validity, our faith is shaken to its core because we allowed our faith to slip insensibly from the Transcendent Authority into certain acts or examples of that Authority. I call this naïve faith – the habit of taking the part or instantiation as equivalent to the whole. When we lose our faith in that part, many of us go on to forsake the One Who by definition can never truly be forsaken. We abandon the entire fort, which we could easily hold forever, only because the enemy is making headway lobbing duds into the moat.

Take, for example, the zeal with which many Muslim apologists proclaim the truth of the Qur'ān on the back of modern scientific discoveries. They contend that certain verses of the Qur'ān are proven to be of divine origin because they tally with particular findings in embryology, geology, or astronomy, for example. In other words, they hang their faith in God's authorship on evidence from the scientific community that may not reflect any consensus or anything conclusive. Then the inevitable riposte from the debunkers arrives, and suddenly we find that those 'scientific' verses are either not accurate, according to the latest science, or already common knowledge at the time of revelation, or too vague to be considered amazing proof of anything. The atheist commentators go further, and point to other

parts of the Qur'ān that are clearly unacceptable to mainstream science, such as Nūḥ (peace be upon him) living for 950 years, the virgin birth of 'Īsā (peace be upon him), or the frequent mention of seven heavens. Anyone with a nonpartisan capacity for looking at both sides of the issue will conclude that the proponents of a 'scientific' Qur'ān have wagered unconditional faith in GOD on a conditional outcome where results are always changing, and have, moreover, been narrowly selective in the verses that they chose to bolster their case. This kind of pious partiality will finally be seen for what it is – bad faith.

A similar dilemma is experienced by those who make their faith in God dependent on the inerrancy of the Bible or success in the battle for intelligent design. If they have placed all their faith there in the front line, where reason and evidence are seen to do battle, then they may have nothing left in reserve, in the realm of the Transcendent where rationalist attacks are futile.

Why do I say futile? Because just as religious faith is of little use in proving things, so is empiricism never decisive in the domain of absolutes. Ideals such as truth, justice, love, and beauty are imperatives of the human spirit beyond the reach of scientific reason. Reason itself is only one such absolute, and therefore not exclusively privileged in judging its peers. We may ask whether peace is rational, or if there is evidence for equality, but we may also ask whether reason is fair, authoritative, or compassionate.

We may also question the assumption that empirical evidence equals truth. Analogous to the naïve faith I mentioned earlier, I call this naïve rationality. We can admit that the scientific model of hypotheses, tests, observations, theories, and laws provides a beautiful system or frame of interlocking explanations of what is testable and observable without denying that truth has always meant much more to humanity than facts, or that the desire for truth and the recognition of truth as true are themselves neither testable nor observable, and yet are powerful motivators for those who claim that empirical evidence alone determines what truth is. The human yearning for truth is itself not transparently open to empirical scrutiny, and yet 'truth' would be useless to us without it. Once again, we can see that beyond the frame of 'science' there are other, higher frames that endow it with ultimate meaning. GOD as The Ultimate Frame and Framer is only meaningless for atheists because they worship at the altar of a smaller god called Science and temporarily ignore all those other absolutes and values, such as Love, Beauty, and Self, which they irrationally accept as given.

Just as believers insensibly abandon the ineffability of GOD for smaller objects of faith, so do rationalists tend to retreat from the majestic

scope of Reason as an expression of Divine Intelligence in all its forms to the petty demand that everything be a material thing, (i.e., that it fit within the confines of the contemporary materialistic world view). When narrow faith meets narrow reason, reason always wins. This is because the home of faith is GOD Himself, The First Believer, while scientism is home inside any box, no matter how small. The aim of the believer should be to expand the breast and point up beyond the limits of the mind in endless opening – to motivate, in other words. The physicalist aims downward, to the most definite and concrete conclusion possible. Heights terrify him.

فَمَنْ يُرِدْ اللَّهُ أَنْ يَهْدِيَهُ يَشْرَحْ صَدْرَهُ لِلْإِسْلَامِ وَمَنْ يُرِدْ أَنْ يُضِلَّهُ  
يَجْعَلْ صَدْرَهُ ضَيِّقًا حَرَجًا كَأْتَمًا يَصْعَدُ فِي السَّمَاءِ كَذَلِكَ يَجْعَلُ اللَّهُ  
الرَّجْسَ عَلَى الَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ

**For one whom GOD desires guidance, He expands his breast to acquiescence. And for one whom GOD desires deviation, He constrains his breast with narrowness, as if he were ascending skyward. Thus does GOD affix disgrace on those who have no faith. (Q6:125)**

When atheists attack a belief system, they naturally assail it at its weakest points, namely where it makes concrete claims or prescribes or permits particular acts. The naïve devotee may feel flustered or angry that his faith has been so rudely and yet cogently derided. A wise believer, however, does not engage in hand-to-hand combat on the narrow fields chosen by her antagonist. She remembers that the disputable details of a religion, where God comes down, as it were, to interact with individual characters and cultures, are like baited fishing lines by which the Truth ‘catches’ up the souls of believing individuals and communities. The lines to GOD are straight, but the hooks are barbed and bent. As I have pointed out before, AL-LĀH describes Himself in ways that are literally anthropomorphic and intentionally poetic, even as He asserts that nothing is like unto Him. The first iterations of a faith are powerful insofar as they are symbolic and expansive, capable of being understood at multiple levels.

ثُمَّ اسْتَوَى إِلَى السَّمَاءِ فَسَوَّاهُنَّ سَبْعَ سَمَاوَاتٍ وَهُوَ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمٌ

**Then He attended to the firmament, arranging it as seven heavens. He, with everything, is One Who Knows. (Q2:29)**

Only later do literal, materialistic readers, both dogmatic proponents and atheist opponents, agree on a debased level of straitened specificity that ends up ripping the faith into incoherent shreds.

Worshippers go astray into idolatry when they take their symbols to be ultimate realities, and channel the devotion due to GOD Alone into whatever vehicles, such as icons, relics, rituals, and statues, they think would help promote that worship. Science, the study of the natural world, likewise degenerates into scientism when its adherents take its field of study to be the entirety of knowledge and the arbiter of all truth. Religious literalism and physicalist scientism feed off each other's narrowness; each must bear a certain amount of blame for the existence of the other.

Given the unpoetical, empiricist tendencies in contemporary culture, our present-day readings of scriptures have the unfortunate result of literally taking God to be something or someone else. This conception presents a big fat target for those who wield the Occam's razor of eliminating unnecessary additional explanations for phenomena. If a meteorological account of precipitation suffices, why do we need God to send down rain from heaven? If a quantum vacuum state can account for the emergence of particles out of virtual nothingness, why should we postulate a Creator at all? If we can make our world relatively safe for human life, our minds content with scientific facts, and our hearts cheerfully resigned to ultimate extinction, why bother with a Saviour?

Fallacious assumptions always lead to fallacious conclusions. The fallacy in all these meanderings, by both believers and unbelievers, is that GOD is somehow external to His creation. Otherness of any sort implies countability and parity. But when we say something is good, we refer to the Good, however unintentionally, as implicit or subtly present in our valuation. It is not something else; rather it is invoked inseparably and concomitantly with our conscious reference to a specific good.

Meaning is the ideational relationship of a part to a whole and, consequently, to connoted parts within that whole. In examining meaning, we usually skip past the assumed or invisible whole right to the part that 'matters.' So if I point to an empty glass next to my plate, the waiter knows mediately that I want it filled. The waiter and I are operating within a generally understood protocol of restaurant service, of assumed mental states, and of various beliefs that constitute our faith in a stable, predictable order of physical and social norms. But if I were to point to a glass of water standing on the pavement under an eavestrough spout in a rainstorm, the whole context of which that glass is a part utterly changes the meaning. That same waiter and I would probably have a good laugh at the irony of how an appropriate gesture within the restaurant becomes absurdly humorous outside in the rain. He would not bother to fill that glass, except perhaps in jest.

Just as an implicit whole informs each meaning, so does GOD Wholly inform each lesser whole. Every context has GOD as its context. And if critics were to counter with their usual rejoinder about an infinite regress, as if GOD were just an item in a series of items, my reply is simply that GOD is the Infinite, all the way back (or ahead) to forever. GOD is ultimately meant in all that we mean. An infinite regress of meaning only signifies that GOD is meant infinitely.

For the scientific materialist, the problem with meanings is that they are physically nowhere to be found. Perceived by the mind, affirmed by the spirit, and essential to any type of communication, they are nonetheless intangible, immeasurable, and unprovable. No brain scan will show us one, and no amount of data can confirm one. The whole world might agree on a meaning, and yet the whole world could still be wrong. However much the scientist might disdain meanings for these reasons, he cannot dispense with them for even a second of his existence. All of his facts are useless without their significance, and lesser meanings, such as mass and evidence and humanity, are equally useless to us if they do not evoke a sense of precision, reliability, relevance, truth, or even beauty. Observations depend on what they mean, meanings depend on their greater meanings, namely the absolutes by which we guide our lives, and those absolutes, in turn, depend for their ultimate value on the One Absolute Who is The Source of all meaning ... regardless of what lesser meanings the physicalists might agree upon despite themselves. A small but growing segment of the scientific community has conceded that reality, including matter and energy, is not material at all, but rather consists of quantum bits (i.e., digital information). They go on, predictably, to equate the cosmos with a computer, and liken God to the programmer of the universe (or multiverse). This is definitely a step up from grosser forms of materialism that require a plain rejection of the Divine, as it makes God implicit in the minutest of phenomenon, just as believers have always asserted. If we say that there is ultimately nothing but information, and therefore that information is All, we are, of course, making a modern pitch for pantheism.<sup>Y</sup>

#### Y

From this perspective, computation seems almost a theological process. It takes as its fodder the primeval choice between yes or no, the fundamental state of 1 or 0. After stripping away all externalities, all material embellishments, what remains is the purest state of

## Y (continued)

existence: here / not here. Am / not am. In the Old Testament, when Moses asks the Creator, “Who are you?” the being says, in effect, “Am.” One bit. One almighty bit. Yes. One. Exist. It is the simplest statement possible.

All creation, from this perch, is made from this irreducible foundation. Every mountain, every star, the smallest salamander or woodland tick, each thought in our mind, each flight of a ball is but a web of elemental yes / nos woven together. If the theory of digital physics holds up, movement ( $f = ma$ ), energy ( $E = mc^2$ ), gravity, dark matter, and antimatter can all be explained by elaborate programs of 1–0 decisions. Bits can be seen as a digital version of the “atoms” of classical Greece: the tiniest constituent of existence. But these new digital atoms are the basis not only of matter, as the Greeks thought, but of energy, motion, mind, and life.\*

This passage is very helpful in demonstrating to naïve rationalists how something immaterial can be hiding in plain sight. But notice here how Kelley finally reduces life to a kind of cyber-materialism, one composed of bits rather than atoms. (And for the layman of classical Greece or modern Europe, what difference does it make?) Having sought God and found a slot for Him, they become enamoured of their box, as by their lights it is greater than the god they have placed inside it.

Another problem is Kelley’s conception of reality as basically digital. While physical reality may be broken down into finite bits or qubits, most of our feelings and values, including our supersensory absolutes, are smooth, continuous, and potentially infinite, thus resembling analog signals. Reality is not always breakable. And GOD, the One, is both Unbroken and Non-Dual, beyond the ones and zeroes of this world.

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\*Kevin Kelley, ‘God is the Machine’ in *Spiritual Information*, ed. by Charles L. Harper, Jr., p. 233.

However, as I have stated earlier, equating GOD with The Divine Mind (let alone an “almighty bit”) generally tends to negate the Personal-Suprapersonal character that we discover in Him through prayer, worship, love, gratitude, and other qualities that identify us as wholehearted persons. The rational pantheism of Spinoza has always been attractive to a certain type of thinker (e.g., Einstein), but it leaves out the transcendent nature of GOD intrinsic to monotheism and panentheism – types of faith that do not allow GOD to be merely equivalent to His creation.



We have seen, firstly, meaning as an example of how the supersensory is inextricably bound to the contexts in which we live our lives. Then we see, secondly, how some scientists regard the computability of matter as informing the very stuff of existence. Information implies not only an informed mind but an informing agent, to which the Qur'ān can simply add:

وَلَا يُنَبِّئُكَ مِثْلُ خَبِيرٍ

**And no one can inform you like Someone Who is Aware. (Q35:14)**

A third immaterial aspect of reality is quantum randomness. We could throw random mutation into the ring as well. What appears random to us, and so assumed to be purposeless or uncaused, may be totally intended by One Who delicately disposes of the finest details, as in **Q31:16**.

إِنْ تَكُنْ مِنْ ثِقَالٍ حَبَّةٍ مِنْ خَرْدَلٍ فَتَكُنْ فِي صَخْرَةٍ أَوْ فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ أَوْ فِي الْأَرْضِ يَأْتِ بِهَا اللَّهُ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَطِيفٌ خَبِيرٌ

**If there be a mustard's seed in weight within a rock or in the heavens or on earth, GOD will bring it forth. Truly GOD is Sensitive, Aware.**

We can only guess how so-called random events could serve as subtle instruments of a Determining Power, imperceptibly nudging the universe along the path of, say, star formation or human evolution. Consider it an example of how GOD draws a translucent veil between His direct activity and its effects in this world. We take note of the veil, namely a limit to our understanding and even the possibility of understanding, and so humbly refrain from inherently limiting assumptions about what lies beyond.

These indications – meaning, information, and randomness – are not proofs of GOD's existence. As I have explained before, we cannot prove what is by definition undefinable, even if recognizable by analogy and metaphor. We may be able to derive an idea of infinity from what is numerically finite, but that would only be numerical infinity. Adding an infinite number of things to get to GOD does not work because (a) GOD is not a thing, and (b) He is Infinitely Infinite, that is, infinite in ways beyond counting. We will probably 'get' GOD faster by not counting.

Like so much in this universe, however, meaning, information, and randomness may be welcomed as signs that point to GOD. Pointing is not arriving, nor is faith by itself a final destination, but faith will take us further than anything else once we have gotten our direction from His signs.

A stop sign does not prove that there is safety in the world. Still, it gives us a good reason to stop and act as if there is.

## 23.

# THE WORLD IS HIDING



I have long wondered why the world is hiding from me. People say that I am ‘in’ the world, that the world is greater than I am, that it was here before me and will be here after I am gone. But when I ask them where the world is, they become confused. They start waving their hands around wildly in all directions and say, “This! All this! This is the world!” When I look, however, I see nothing but the things that they are waving at – the sky, the ground, the trees, the streets, the people, and so on.

I ask for clarification. They answer with more invisible abstractions – the environment, society, nature, the Earth, space, the universe ... but I have never seen any of those things either. So I reply, “One tall tale at a time, please. I hear people talk more about the world, so let’s stick to that for now. I still cannot see (or hear, taste, smell, or touch) the world.”

I am open to persuasion, but I will not believe in something simply because everyone else does. Call me a nonresistant agnostic, if you will. Show me, and I will believe. If you cannot, however, the fault is not mine. The world that people are always referring to is hidden from me, yet my senses are as good as theirs. Where is the evidence?

When people hear me speak in this way, they become angry. They accuse me of deliberately abandoning the meaning of words. But of what use is a word if it does not name something to which I can meaningfully relate? When I ask them how they relate to the world, they begin to stutter and stumble around in search of something concrete. Eventually they mention how they engage with, or how they think or feel about, tangible objects that are not the world, but merely (what they call) parts of the world. But how do I know that they are parts of anything if the whole is so incomprehensible and remote?

I conclude, therefore, that the world has yet to demonstrate its existence to me. The world is hiding.



Modern atheist philosophers have asked, in a similar vein, why a Loving God Who desires our guidance and salvation would intentionally ‘hide’ from fair-minded, neutral seekers of truth. ‘We’re looking,’ they say, in effect, ‘but not seeing what we should be seeing if God is what believers claim Him to be. It does not make sense that Someone Who claims to be the Truth, and also Compassionate, would erect so many roadblocks to human understanding if He truly is humanity’s Greatest Good, the highest goal of spiritual achievement. What we are seeing, namely nothing, is what one would expect to see if God was nothing more than an artifact invented by ancient religions, and now only an embarrassing relic of the past and an obstacle to scientific progress.’

This demand to be shown God or see some proof of His visible existence, as if He could be called out from His hiding place like an animal in a zoo, is certainly not modern or innovative.

يَسْأَلُكَ أَهْلُ الْكِتَابِ أَنْ تُنْزِلَ عَلَيْهِمْ كِتَابًا مِنَ السَّمَاءِ فَقَدْ سَأَلُوا  
مُوسَى أَكْبَرَ مِنْ ذَلِكَ فَقَالُوا أَرَنَا اللَّهَ جَهْرَةً فَأَخَذَتْهُمُ الصَّاعِقَةُ  
بِظُلْمِهِمْ ثُمَّ اتَّخَذُوا الْعِجْلَ مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا جَاءَتْهُمْ الْبَيِّنَاتُ فَعَفَوْنَا عَنْ ذَلِكَ

The People of the Scripture ask that you bring down for them a book from heaven. Verily they asked of Mūsā more than that, for they demanded, “Let us see God plainly”; consequently, they were struck by lightning due to their injustice. Then they took the calf to be an idol, after signs that had been shown to them, and We forgave them that. (Q4:153)

أَوْ تُسْقِطِ السَّمَاءَ كَمَا زَعَمْتَ عَلَيْنَا كِسْفًا أَوْ تَأْتِي بَالِ اللَّهِ وَالْمَلَائِكَةِ قَبِيلًا

“Or make the sky, as you have claimed, come down in pieces on us, or have God accompanied by angels come before us.” (Q17:92)

On the one hand, the doubters hold Him responsible for everything, if He exists. On the other hand, if He exists, these same critics want Him responsible to them. The presumption latent in these demands is astounding. But a need for signs “that my heart may be at peace” (Q2:260) is what makes us human, and so is not always spurned.

إِذْ قَالَ الْحَوَارِيُّونَ يَا عِيسَى ابْنَ مَرْيَمَ هَلْ يَسْتَطِيعُ رَبُّكَ أَنْ يُنْزِلَ  
عَلَيْنَا مَائِدَةً مِنَ السَّمَاءِ قَالَ اتَّقُوا اللَّهَ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ مُؤْمِنِينَ  
قَالُوا نُرِيدُ أَنْ نَأْكُلَ مِنْهَا وَتَطْمَئِنَّ قُلُوبُنَا وَنَعْلَمَ أَنْ قَدْ صَدَّقَتْنَا وَنَكُونَ  
عَلَيْهَا مِنَ الشَّاهِدِينَ

[Remember] when his followers inquired, “O ‘Īsā, Son of Maryam, can your Lord send down a banquet table from the sky for us?” He replied, “Beware of GOD if you are faithful.” / They replied, “We want to dine from it so that our hearts may rest assured that you have spoken truly unto us and so that we may be witnesses of that.” (Q5:112–113)

After a prayer from ‘Īsā (peace be upon him), the reply comes:

قَالَ اللَّهُ إِنِّي مُنْزِلُهَا عَلَيْكُمْ فَمَنْ يَكْفُرْ بَعْدُ مِنْكُمْ فَإِنِّي أُعَذِّبُهُ عَذَابًا لَا  
أُعَذِّبُهُ أَحَدًا مِنَ الْعَالَمِينَ

AL-LĀH said, “Truly I shall send it down to you. Then as for him who disbelieves among you afterwards, I shall inflict a punishment with which I will not punish any other [person] of the worlds.” (Q5:115)

The clear message here is that the more you know of the truth, the greater your responsibility is to it, and the greater the penalty if you shirk that responsibility. Mere knowledge without a corresponding commitment does not confer impunity or even salvation – quite the contrary. Rather it increases one’s own peril if one defaults.

Remember that Iblīs, who refused to bow to Ādam, had more knowledge of AL-LĀH than any human scholar has ever had (which is why he said, **I fear AL-LĀH – and GOD is strict in punishment.** (Q8:48). Yet the curse he bears, and the punishment he faces, are that much greater likewise on account of his betrayal of the moral burden that always attends significant knowledge.

It is no crime to ask for the impossible, for what we consider impossible may not be so for AL-LĀH. Mūsā (peace be upon him) asked to see GOD: When Mūsā came to Our appointment, and His Master spoke with him, he said, “O Master, let me see You.” He replied, “You shall not see Me. Look, though, at the mountain; if it keeps its place, then you will see Me.” When his Lord appeared before the mountain, He disintegrated it, and Mūsā fell unconscious. Then, when he awoke, he said, “How gloriously far Beyond You are! I turn repentant unto You, and I am foremost of the faithful.” (Q7:143) GOD’s response was more

a lesson than a rebuke, for the motivation behind the request was a worthy one, and its outcome was an increase in repentance and faith. But when the demand to see GOD – **Let us see God plainly** – stems not from a desire to strengthen one’s faith but merely to enhance one’s knowledge, and is intended more as a challenge than as a prayer, then the answer is as devastating as a lightning bolt ... as if to say, “This is what it feels like to ‘see’ God when your heart is not humbly prepared for it.”

Working from the assumption that all persons can be ‘placed’ somehow, and that the intellect is sufficient to identify a placeholder of that sort, we expect that ordinary spatial vision and its auxiliary mental powers are all we need to ‘see.’ But as I suggested in Chapter 5, the universe has a personal, heartfelt element discernible only by the eye of faith. There are some things that must be affirmed before they can be ‘seen’ in this way. If you affirm a falsehood in an environment where such claims are testable or comparable to clearly visible evidence, that falsehood will be easily dismissed. But if you affirm a falsehood that cannot be tested – the concept of the Trinity, for example – then nothing but a higher and clearer affirmation, (i.e., that GOD is Absolutely One), will suffice to wipe that lie away. Even when endowed with this superlative sight, Mūsā (peace be upon him) was incapable of ‘seeing’ GOD. What he did see was the impact of His Presence, and that was enough to knock him unconscious.

If the sight, not of GOD, but of one of His powers in action was enough to cause an intrepid spiritual adventurer like Mūsā (peace be upon him) to black out, how much more likely is it that there would there be disastrous consequences if He were to respond to the demands for proof by today’s atheists? Their minds could be stricken numb for life, rendering them the mental equivalent of the pigs and monkeys mentioned in the Qur’ān. Their not seeing, not knowing, and thereby being less accountable represents GOD’s kindness to them. Yes, they will almost certainly undergo a period of cleansing in the Fire – a necessary prerequisite for finally entering GOD’s presence – but that is something even believers may have to undergo in proportion to the greater knowledge they presumably have.

GOD remains our Greatest Good, and only He knows what is best for us. If He causes one of us to be born, to live, and to die in an unbelieving environment, with all the risks for our afterlife that entails, then that might still be better for us than to be placed in a situation where our greater exposure to the possibility of faith is counterbalanced by the greater penalty we incur if we see, know, and yet turn away. There are no guarantees, except for

الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَلَمْ يَلْبِسُوا إِيمَانَهُمْ بِظُلْمٍ أُولَٰئِكَ لَهُمُ الْأَمْنُ وَهُمْ مُهْتَدُونَ

**Those whose faith was not contaminated with injustice – safety is for them, and they are rightly guided. (Q6:82)**

In the Qur’ānic stories of the peoples of the past, the most persistent theme is the tragic contrast between those who were ready for the signs of AL-LĀH, namely the prophets, and those who were not, namely the vast majority who rejected these messengers of GOD and were consequently destroyed. So it is that AL-LĀH declares:

وَمَا مَنَعَنَا أَنْ نُرْسِلَ بِالْآيَاتِ إِلَّا أَنْ كَذَّبَ بِهَا الْأَوَّلُونَ وَآتَيْنَا ثَمُودَ  
النَّاقَةَ مُبْصِرَةً فَظَلَمُوا بِهَا وَمَا نُرْسِلُ بِالْآيَاتِ إِلَّا تَخْوِيفًا

**Nothing held Us back from sending signs but that the former folk had contradicted them. We gave Thamūd the female camel, clear to see, and yet they did it harm, although the signs We send are meant to stir up fear. (Q17:59)<sup>z</sup>**

## Z

This is the fear, akin to religious awe, that Huxley (quoted in Wikipedia under “Numinous”) describes as follows:

The literature of religious experience abounds in references to the pains and terrors overwhelming those who have come, too suddenly, face to face with some manifestation of the *mysterium tremendum*. In theological language, this fear is due to the incompatibility between man’s egotism and the divine purity, between man’s self-aggravated separateness and the infinity of God.” \*

\*Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception and Heaven and Hell*, p. 55.

Even Satan, the most knowledgeable of creatures, confesses to fearing GOD (Q8:48). But today’s atheist thinkers, including those who admit feelings of awe when contemplating the vastness of the universe or the incredibly fine detail and complexity of the microscopic realms that inhabit our own bodies, would be the first to dismiss with scorn the possibility of ever feeling fear when confronted with a purported sign of God. Or they would resent having been overcome with fear despite themselves.

وَنُخَوِّفُهُمْ فَمَا يَزِيدُهُمْ إِلَّا طُغْيَانًا كَبِيرًا

**And We stir fear in them, but they do not increase in anything thereby but great iniquity. (Q17:60)**

There is, consequently, a price that anyone exposed to GOD must pay ... and most of us lack the spiritual capacity to pay it. By leaving us relatively unexposed and ignorant, GOD is leaving us with an excuse, and thus mitigating the penalty we might otherwise incur if we were to refuse, like Satan, to believe and obey after encountering an undeniable sign of the Divine. Punishment is for deliberate denial, not excusable ignorance. Unconscious creation is incapable of denial, its default state being one of calm submission:

ثُمَّ اسْتَوَىٰ إِلَى السَّمَاءِ وَهِيَ دُخَانٌ فَقَالَ لَهَا وَلِلْأَرْضِ ائْتِيَا طَوْعًا أَوْ  
كَرْهًا قَالَتَا أَتَيْنَا طَائِعِينَ

Then He betook Himself to heaven while it yet was smoke, and said to it and to the earth, “Come willingly or come by force.” They answered, “We have come obediently.” (Q41:11)

أَفَعَيِّرَ دِينَ اللَّهِ يَبْغُونَ وَلَهُ أَسْلَمَ مَنْ فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ طَوْعًا  
وَكَرْهًا وَإِلَيْهِ يُرْجَعُونَ

Is it other than the Way of GOD that they desire, whereas whoever is in heaven and on earth submits to Him, obediently or grudgingly,<sup>A</sup> and unto Him they are returned? (Q3:83)

Being unconscious of GOD, therefore, is a blessing compared to the state of being conscious and in denial. Man is forever seeking more powerful states of consciousness, manifested, among other things, in the demand to see God, and yet remains mostly oblivious of the greater risk such impudence entails. There is no total state of ignorance in mankind – we are all ‘exposed’ to some extent – but if there were, it would also be the bliss and exaltation of the worm, the rosebud, and the dust mote.

This is one reason why GOD ‘hides’ from us. The other is that the question ‘Why is GOD hiding?’ is in itself half the answer. The ‘Why’ – and all other questions – would be meaningless if GOD were manifest. Indeed there would be no need to ask questions, and no one to ask them.

△

Submitting **grudgingly** is readily seen among us nowadays, in individuals who choose to deny or defy GOD while their bodies and minds continue to obey His decrees, such as through the so-called laws of nature, and in the flux of their own unmanageable feelings and thoughts.

Once again, the answer is in plain sight – ‘That you might seek Him.’ GOD is implicit not only in the hiding but also in the seeking; we cannot ‘get’ GOD without GOD’s being wholly involved as both Sought and Seeker. So purely physicalist, reductionist answers that objectify God, failing thereby to consider His presence as a subject, are out of the question. If we want clues to GOD, we have to look for GOD-like clues, not ones that correspond only to our puny conceptions of how things are put together. And because the answer – GOD – is infinite, and hence infinitely Beyond our capacity to understand, the faith that motivates us to seek is, at this stage of our existence, more important than the extent of what we find. The hiddenness of GOD not only spurs us to keep seeking but also ensures that our ceaseless finding, however small, is eternally rewarding.

The paradox of GOD being both Transcendent and Immanent, both Infinitely Remote and Infinitely Present, is that He is never ‘found’ in the sense that, once discovered, He is entirely known and defined. With the right perspective, we find Him in the absolutes by which we live from day to day, or rather we find signs of Him, for that indeed is all we can ever discover of the Divine. Do the doubters who complain about His hiddenness imagine that He could be pried out of the universe like a boulder excavated from the soil and left to dry in the sun? And if they could not see Him in His Wholeness, would they not continue to cavil that they do not see Him, but only a partial god, a semi-divine being? Would a wholly visible God be at all credible or worthy of worship? Although He manifests Himself in finite things, no amount of them could adequately express His infinity. So however much a doubter attempts to see of GOD, it would never be enough to convince her of the absurdity of her request.

The very nature of the atheists’ demand belies their sincerity and seriousness, and betrays ignorance of the simplest concepts of theology. A scientist who demands that GOD show evidence of Himself on these materialistic terms reminds me of a child who asks to see the original manuscript of the theory of relativity so he can make a paper airplane.

The human faculty that best appreciates the presence of divine infinity is termed, in Qur’ānic parlance, the heart. The vision of the heart, or spiritual insight, is what is lacking when we complain that we cannot see GOD. The spiritually blind simply cannot imagine what they are missing, and so assume it does not exist.

فَإِنَّهَا لَا تَعْمَى الْأَبْصَارُ وَلَكِنْ تَعْمَى الْقُلُوبُ الَّتِي فِي الصُّدُورِ

Truly it is not their vision that is blind, but blinded are the hearts within the bosoms. (Q22:46)



Let us look at a number of ways that we are blinded, particularly compared to the believers described in **Q17:107**: Truly those imbued with knowledge previous to it, when it was read to them, would fall upon their faces in prostration; and **Q5:83**: And when they hear what was revealed to the Messenger, you see their eyes aflow with tears from what they recognize as Truth, and they exclaim, “Our Lord, we do believe, so enter us among the witnesses!”

## 1. DISTANCE IN TIME FROM REVELATION

There are times in history when the appearance of a prophet, a miracle, or a divine revelation produces a surge of faith that gradually dissipates over time. As faith declines, so do the virtues that spring from faith, such as loyalty, honesty, and frugality. This fading effect can go on indefinitely, as mentioned in these two *ḥadīth*:

سَمِعْتُ عِمْرَانَ بْنَ حُصَيْنٍ رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُمَا يَقُولُ قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ خَيْرُ أُمَّتِي قَرْنِي ثُمَّ الَّذِينَ يَلُونَهُمْ ثُمَّ الَّذِينَ يَلُونَهُمْ ثُمَّ إِنَّ بَعْدَكُمْ قَوْمًا يَشْهَدُونَ وَلَا يُسْتَشْهَدُونَ وَيَخُونُونَ وَلَا يُؤْتَمَنُونَ وَيَنْذُرُونَ وَلَا يَفُونَ وَيَظْهَرُ فِيهِمُ السِّمْنُ

*I heard ‘Imrānab-na Ḥuṣain (may GOD be pleased with them both) say, the Messenger of AL-LĀH (may GOD bless him and give him peace) said, “The best of my community is my generation, then those following them, then those following them. Then truly after them are people who testify without being asked, who betray without being entrusted, who vow without performing their vows, and among whom fatness is prevalent.”*  
(*Ṣaḥīḥul-Bukhārī, Book 62, Ḥadīth 2*)

عَنْ الرَّبِيرِ بْنِ عَدِيٍّ قَالَ أَتَيْنَا أَنَسَ بْنَ مَالِكٍ فَشَكَّوْنَا إِلَيْهِ مَا نَلْقَى مِنَ الْحَجَّاجِ فَقَالَ اصْبِرُوا فَإِنَّهُ لَا يَأْتِي عَلَيْكُمْ زَمَانٌ إِلَّا الَّذِي بَعْدَهُ شَرُّ مِنْهُ حَتَّى تَلْقُوا رَبَّكُمْ سَمِعْتُهُ مِنْ نَبِيِّكُمْ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ

*From Az-Zubairib-ni ‘Adīy, who said, “We came to Anasab-na Mālik and complained to him about what we suffered from Al-Ḥajjāj<sup>Φ</sup> [a ruthless governor]. He replied, ‘Be patient, for verily no time will come upon you except that what is after it is worse until you meet your Lord.’ I heard it from your Prophet (may GOD bless him and give him peace).”*  
(*Ṣaḥīḥul-Bukhārī, Book 92, Ḥadīth 19*)



I cannot suppress a wry smile of mingled horror and amusement whenever I recall the story of Al-Ḥajjāj's prayer on his deathbed, told to me by a friend. It captures in one short sentence the mixture of distorted piety, awareness of his cruelties and sins, and the spirit of defiance of his foes he was taking with him into the life beyond. "O AL-LĀH, forgive me, for they suppose that You will not."

In this way, the same God Who was obviously true for a previous generation can be lost in the mists of time to the point of seeming to disappear. It is, of course, not GOD Who is lost, but those whose imaginations fail to retain the Light of GOD in the darkness of these latter days.

## 2. DISTANCE IN SPACE FROM REVELATION

An analogous tapering effect occurs geographically. Even with the advent of global information networks and seemingly immediate access to the lived realities of other countries, physical proximity still counts for a lot in how we experience the world. When we come to a land or site we consider sacred or holy, or where revelations took place even millennia before today, we suddenly begin to feel something of how it must have felt then. The terrain, the light, the air, and the odours all convey a 'sense' of how things were that no amount of reading or imagination can produce. Lacking all that, the 'truth' associated with that place somehow seems less real ... as if GOD were more present 'there' than 'here.' Reason tells us that this is nonsense, but our other faculties fail to follow suit.

## 3. NON-THEISTIC CULTURE

Although the character traits of GOD, namely the absolutes by which men and women live their lives, are easily recognizable in every human culture, large swathes of the world are not attuned to monotheism or, in many cases, any kind of theism whatsoever. One might say that 'God' is the default reference point for much of the Islamic world and in Christian regions that have not entirely embraced secularism, such as Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa, while much of East and Southeast Asia, for example, tends to downplay the existence of a Supreme Being in its own characteristic forms of spirituality. Modern Western culture is likewise

shedding its spiritual tradition of faith in One True God in favour of various secular and eclectic alternatives. It is far more likely, therefore, that a person in Japan or Norway, for example, will think that God is hiding than someone in Yemen or Nicaragua.

#### 4. THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT

Human handiwork is so prevalent in city landscapes that one may easily conclude that GOD is no longer important; everything one needs can be invented, redesigned, manufactured, reorganized, and managed by man. The rhythms of nature are superseded by clocks and schedules; air conditioning and central heating minimize the power of the seasons; systems and concepts relegate subtlety, nuance, compassion, and intuition to the margins of our lives; trees, birds, and breezes are hemmed in by paved roads and modern office towers. In such a setting, it is easy to discount or ignore the constant presence of GOD.

#### 5. THE INTELLECTUAL ENVIRONMENT

Rummaging through the toolshed of one's brain for a God-shaped object will disclose only clutter and cobwebs, and turning God into a talking point or a debate topic will likewise raise nothing but dust if disconnected from the life of the spirit. The modern academic stance of detachment is eminently suited to missing what is most important about GOD; either He seizes your heart and demands attachment or He is like nothing to you, at most a stick-figure caught in the conceptual webs you are busy spinning. The latest strands are "tendencies to self-referentiality, epistemological and moral relativism, pluralism, and irreverence"<sup>4</sup> – hardly fertile ground for discovering one's Lord and Creator.

#### 6. FRIENDS AND SOCIAL MILIEU

For the average person in modern Western culture, including most professionals whose careers are at stake if they take positions that are regarded by their peers as silly, GOD is little more than an embarrassment and a conversation-killer. The pain of being mocked, stared at, scorned, or shunned is too great for most people.

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<sup>4</sup> From the entry in Wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postmodernism>.

عَنْ أَبِي هُرَيْرَةَ أَنَّ النَّبِيَّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ قَالَ الرَّجُلُ عَلَى دِينِ  
خَلِيلِهِ فَلْيَنْظُرْ أَحَدُكُمْ مَنْ يُخَالِلُ

*From Abī Hurairah, [who said] that the Prophet (may GOD bless him and give him peace) said, “A man follows the religion of his friend, so let each of you consider whom he befriends.”*

*(Sunanu Abī Dāwūd, Book 43, Ḥadīth 61)*

## 7. THE SYNTHETIC SELF

If one's self-image or personal identity is constructed in such a way that there is no opening to the Infinite, then it can actually feel as if GOD is a suffocating presence or hostile force, and that to succumb to Him is to die. The answer to this threat is to first relegate GOD to the realm of concepts and then to quietly expunge Him from one's thoughts, since concepts are more disposable than The Living. After that, declaring Him to be in hiding is a formality, a polite way of announcing His death. There follows a period of exhilaration ... and 'freedom' – that sauce slathered over every moral discourse, regardless of taste – becomes one's vacuous standard and slogan for life.

## 8. ACTIONS AND INACTIONS

We tend to think that actions are shaped by beliefs, but the reverse is also at least as true. Our unreflecting impulses, reactions to events, and habits both mental and practical become an identity that we feel honour-bound to justify, and so an improvised faith in what we are, one that was never thought through thoroughly but only cobbled together after the fact, becomes our creed and *raison d'être*. If we have acted heedlessly of GOD and somehow succeeded in reaching an advanced age, we feel both confirmed and heavily invested in continuing the way we began. This, by the way, is why religions mandate not only doctrines and attitudes but also practices; what we do (or omit doing) often determines our structure of belief more than what we say or think.

## 9. CHARACTER AND MOTIVATION

Probably the biggest blind spot in the character of the West, where demands to see God are commonplace, is the gaping chasm between what we claim to know (almost everything) and what we actually know (almost nothing), particularly with regard to who we are and who GOD is. We

construct a metaphysical framework around the strictures of physical science, where visual confirmation is paramount, and then accept or reject a whole universe of supersensory realities on this flimsy basis. Again, this supposedly scientific approach is nothing new.

وَقَالَ الَّذِينَ لَا يَرْجُونَ لِقَاءَنَا لَوْلَا أُنْزِلَ عَلَيْنَا الْمَلَائِكَةُ أَوْ نَرَى رَبَّنَا  
لَقَدْ اسْتَكْبَرُوا فِي أَنْفُسِهِمْ وَغَتُّوا عُنُقًا كَبِيرًا

**Those who do not hope to meet Us say, “If only angels were sent down to us, or we could see our Lord.” Indeed they think too highly of themselves and manifest the greatest insolence. (Q25:21)**

Why is this condemnation so harsh? Is it not human nature to want to know more? Should we not be eager to come face to face with an angel? Were not the prophets always yearning to see their Lord? Are we not promised that vision in the Everafter as the greatest and purest possible bliss in Paradise?

The key to this apparent paradox is not so much what is said but rather the attitude underlying it, delineated in the phrase, **who do not hope to meet Us**. In other words, their wish is not so much a prayer as a statement of their criteria for accepting the existence of God and His angels. When we affirm them as real (i.e., have faith in them), we have already begun to meet them. But if, in our arrogance, we demand that they first conform to our ‘scientific’ frame of what we think is real, they most certainly will not conform. The demand to see under such conditions is being made only to prove a point, not to improve one’s faith. GOD forgives ignorance when followed by repentance, but He will never obey it, nor will His angels. They appear only to those who humbly wait, in fear and hope, for any spark of truth that comes, which is known by how it fills the heart and makes it tremble.

All spiritual traditions seek to open this channel to the Divine. Each tradition designates and interprets it differently, according to the various doctrines and teachings that flesh out that ineffable experience. The Source, however, is One, The One Whom the Qur’ān names AL-LĀH.

## 10. LOOKING OUT FOR GOD

A scientist who demands evidence for God’s existence may be said to be on the look-out for God. Being ‘out there’ is how we normally visualize

Him in our mind's eye, and corresponds to our naïve conception of transcendence. This is one way of framing Him – as an external, separate being, analogous to objects that occupy space. Hence we – believers and non-believers alike – mistakenly develop an expectation of seeing God 'out there' somewhere.

In the Qur'ān, this exoteric representation of transcendence is condescended to by means of spatial and physical metaphors, such as His Footstool, His "sending down" rain and revelation, and so on, as discussed earlier. I would like to suggest, however, that the Qur'ān prefers His Immanence, despite its esoteric undertones, as a more accurate mode of expressing GOD's Transcendence.

Why do I say so? Consider the Names of AL-LĀH most frequently mentioned in the Qur'ān (other than "AL-LĀH" itself). Are they characteristic of an external object or of an inwardly experienced personality? The names most often repeated are also the ones mentioned first in the Qur'ān and the ones most recited in every Muslim prayer cycle, for which al-Fātiḥah (the Opening) is mandatory reading. They are Ar-Raḥmān (The Gracious) and Ar-Raḥīm (The Compassionate). These names portray what we can only feel in terms of an inner life; they mean nothing without the 'who-ness' of One Who Loves. And if love is not inherently 'in here,' I do not know what is.

Given the education, training, and cultural perspective of the modern adherent of scientism, it is only natural that his first question regarding God will be 'Why can't I see Him?' (instead of, for example, 'Why can't I love Him?') He will go on insisting that this type of question is intrinsically reasonable for as long as he fails to see the built-in bias of posing 'out there' criteria for a reality that must also be revisualized as 'in here.' Owing to his object-oriented belief system, he may never subject himself to a 'look-in' for GOD.

Many believers are likewise stuck in their adherence to a spatially framed 'out there' type of transcendence, and consequently suffer from various forms of spiritual aridity, legalism, and literalism. Scientists may be excused for their ignorance of this inner spiritual domain, but how can the faithful forget that **GOD comes in between the human being and his heart, and that to Him you will be gathered (Q8:24)?**

## 24.

### COUNTLESS KNOTS, ONE ROPE



Contrary to the usual self-talk that defines us as individuals, or the social talk that has formed communal narratives and national identities since the time of Ādam, the Qur’ān is a recitation of ‘GOD-talk’ – how AL-LĀH proposes a new or higher standard of discourse. By speech alternately literal and figurative, peremptory and allusive, plain and surreptitious, GOD unwearingly works to erode our complacency, our sense of entitlement, our egotism, and ultimately our conviction that we are at the centre of things. For as long as we consider ourselves to be separate from Him, His message will be felt, at best, as subversive, and, more commonly, intolerable. By this imagined separation our ties to GOD are turned into knots.

### **KNOT**

*When your life is in a knot,  
Every strand of it is taut  
With the strain of ‘I cannot.’  
If you fight it, well, you’ve fought  
Many times before, and shot  
At your soul when it forgot,  
Lost in garbage that you bought,  
Or the trash that you were taught  
By those friends who said you ought  
To have this, get that, or rot  
In the system – draw your lot  
For the world-disease you’ve caught.*

*Then there comes to you the thought  
 That the only one you've got  
 Is the One Who laid this plot.  
 Isn't He the Help you sought  
 On your knees, in tears, distraught,  
 And in the dark, when you were brought  
 To wish unravelled all you wrought?  
 Gently touch that pain, that spot;  
 There's His Hand, where you are nought ...  
 Softly working on your knot.*

Every individual has his or her own unique knot, and so in the Qur'ān and the *ḥadīth* literature we find a vast array of self-noughting strategies to undo them. Here are a few of them:

#### DISSIPATED ILLUSIONS

وَلَقَدْ جِئْتُمُونَا فُرَادَى كَمَا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ أَوَّلَ مَرَّةٍ وَتَرَكْتُمْ مَا خَوَّلْنَاكُمْ وَرَاءَ  
 ظُهُورِكُمْ وَمَا نَرَى مَعَكُمْ شُفَعَاءَكُمُ الَّذِينَ زَعَمْتُمْ أَنَّهُمْ فِيكُمْ شُرَكَاءُ  
 لَقَدْ تَقَطَّعَ بَيْنَكُمْ وَضَلَّ عَنْكُمْ مَا كُنْتُمْ تَزْعُمُونَ

**Now you have come to Us alone, as We created you at first, and you have left behind what We bestowed on you. Nor do We see with you the intercessors you believed possessed a share in you. Now are the ties between you cut, and what you used to think has now forsaken you. (Q6:94)**

For many of us, the first step in dethroning the self is to expose that throne as a potpourri of crutches, toys, and swaddling clothes. The onset of death forces us to release some of these, but most of us die with our illusions intact, believing that we possess powerful justifications for ourselves in the form of our friends and family, our achievements, our 'legacy' as set out in obsequious obituaries, or the idols we worshipped, such as our nation, our culture, our civilization, or humanity, not to mention the traditional deities, saints, *sheikhs*, and *boddhisatvas* of the various faiths and cults. But GOD is not done with us, especially after death. That is because the prime tie – the only one that matters – can finally be explained when all those others have been definitely and willingly relinquished.



## CONSCIOUS SUBMISSION

إِذْ قَالَ لَهُ رَبُّهُ أَسْلِمْ قَالَ أَسْلَمْتُ لِرَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ

**When his Lord addressed him [Ibrāhīm], “Submit,” he said, “I have submitted to The Master of the worlds.” (Q2:131)**

Few illusions are as fact-free as the belief that the self is free, or that independence is achievable, let alone desirable. Even the Stoic ideal of the noble soul maintaining its spiritual liberty of will against the chains, blandishments, threats, and vices of the world must grapple with the limits of what virtue can accomplish without an adequate supply of reliable information, mental acuity, and physical vitality. The most powerful individual imaginable is still dependent on at least one Supplier for her supposed willpower and relative freedom. We all have masters, even if, as in the case of passions or ideals, we think we are the owners. (Try making your desires disappear if you claim you can control them.) The Qur’ānic program confronts this reality and says, in effect, “Since you are disposed, by the fact that you are human, to submit to something, knowingly or not, make your submission a matter of full informed consent, and bow your head to the highest possible Authority, once and for all.”

## DIDACTIC DESTRUCTION

أَفَلَمْ يَسِيرُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ فَيَنْظُرُوا كَيْفَ كَانَ عَاقِبَةُ الَّذِينَ مِنْ قَبْلِهِمْ  
كَانُوا أَكْثَرَ مِنْهُمْ وَأَشَدَّ قُوَّةً وَأَثَارًا فِي الْأَرْضِ فَمَا أَغْنَى عَنْهُمْ مَا  
كَانُوا يَكْسِبُونَ  
فَلَمَّا جَاءَتْهُمْ رُسُلُهُمْ بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ فَرَحُوا بِمَا عِنْدَهُمْ مِنَ الْعِلْمِ وَحَاقَ بِهِمْ  
مَا كَانُوا بِهِ يَسْتَهْزِئُونَ

**Have they not travelled on the Earth and seen what was the end of those before them? They were greater in their numbers and their strength and what they built upon the Earth, but their achievements failed them. / When their messengers brought truthful demonstrations to them, they exulted in the knowledge that they had, and what they used to ridicule engulfed them. (Q40:82–83)**

The Qur’ān repeatedly mentions the exemplary failures of the past, reminding us that our feelings of security and immunity are delusional. What we pride ourselves on now will be of no avail, just as it provided no

benefit to people before us. And if it is objected that believers (in GOD, that is) die and suffer just as much, and that virtuous communities of the past have likewise disappeared, the answer is yes, but this world was never an idol or refuge for believers. Even when they die or fail in worldly terms, they are saved from something that never held their hearts. For the unbelievers, on the other hand, this world, with its power, wealth, and seeming permanence, was all they had. The believers only lost what they had gladly surrendered; the unbelievers lost everything they treasured.

## ABANDONING DEFENSIVENESS

يَا عِبَادِيَ الَّذِينَ أَسْرَفُوا عَلَىٰ أَنْفُسِهِمْ لَا تَقْنَطُوا مِنْ رَحْمَةِ اللَّهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ  
يَغْفِرُ الذَّنْبَ جَمِيعًا إِنَّهُ هُوَ الْغَفُورُ الرَّحِيمُ

**O My slaves who have transgressed against themselves, despair not of the mercy of AL-LĀH. Indeed AL-LĀH forgives all sins. Indeed, He is The Pardoning, The Merciful. (Q39:53)**

The substitution of GOD for self is a delicate and complicated process which, if rushed, can lead to overwhelming confusion, anxiety, guilt, and despair. It often feels like giving up everything for nothing. At each step of the way, therefore, the *mujāhid* (one who is conducting this *jihād*, or struggle) has to carefully weigh his or her inner resources and the strength of the opposition, and thus know when to push forward, when to stop, and even when to retreat. Having a reliable, understanding, and compassionate Protector and Friend – one’s means (as a Guide) as well as one’s End – is for many the only way to make this struggle bearable and worthwhile. If we are going to release our self from ourselves, we need to feel there is an even greater Protector waiting to catch us and forgive us as we fall.

## UNDOING ANGST

When we turn to GOD, it is His Light that attracts us. And when we turn away from Him, other forces, namely the false lights of pride, lust, and other gods we deem to be greater than GOD, exert their power.<sup>9</sup> But we cannot perform anything, even closing our hearts to Him, without His closure.

Indeed, the repugnance one feels at the thought of GOD having power over one’s fate is the real-time experience of being repelled, or in other words misguided, by AL-LĀH. The moment we revert to acceptance and consent, however, we are free of the existential angst that constantly puts us on the spot (by putting the spotlight on us), and the illusion of unfairness

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Everything happens according to GOD's Effective Will, or Command of Power. If it accords with His Ethical Will, or Command of Obligation, then it counts as His Guidance. But if it violates or veers away from His Ethical Will, then it is termed His Misguidance. He is still in control, but His Approval is missing from those events.

vanishes like a knotty *koan* unravelled at last. Disarming ourselves, we are, by a simple yet terribly difficult agreement to 'stand down,' suddenly the **friends of GOD**.

أَلَا إِنَّ أَوْلِيَاءَ اللَّهِ لَا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحْزَنُونَ  
الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَكَانُوا يَتَّقُونَ  
لَهُمُ الْبُشْرَىٰ فِي الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا وَفِي الْآخِرَةِ لَا تَبْدِيلَ لِكَلِمَاتِ اللَّهِ ذَلِكَ  
هُوَ الْفَوْزُ الْعَظِيمُ

**Verily the friends of GOD are free of fear nor do they grieve – / Those who did believe and practised vigilance. / They deserve good tidings in this worldly life and in the Everafter. Nothing alters what AL-LĀH has spoken. That is the tremendous victory. (Q10:62–64)**

On the fringes of the Ineffable, talk of GOD must resort to figures of speech such as rope and knots, or light and shadows. If GOD is All, why not just do away with the knots and shadows, and speak only of One Rope, One Light?

If Light were to banish all darkness, then nothing that could cast a shadow would be permitted to exist, including ourselves, and nothing would be left to say, "This is Light." Meaning comes from the contrast of this and that, from diversity. To talk about Light, we must have darkness in the background of our minds. In any discussion of Good, we cannot avoid implying the existence of evil. And thus these concepts, by the sorcery of language and our need to make clear distinctions, generate a chronic and inevitable dualism. Necessary illusions intrude upon our thoughts and offer themselves as an alternate reality, one in which light and darkness are equivalent marks on a graph, good and evil contend as equal forces in our lives, and God is spoken of as a person, however supreme, who bears comparison to whatever is set up against Him, be it the

world, the devil, free will, or other gods. So commonplace have these views become that we no longer sense the fallacy underlying them.

قُلْ هَلْ يَسْتَوِي الْأَعْمَى وَالْبَصِيرُ أَمْ هَلْ تَسْتَوِي الظُّلُمَاتُ وَالنُّورُ أَمْ  
جَعَلُوا لِلَّهِ شُرَكَاءَ خَلَقُوا كَخَلْقِهِ فَتَشَابَهَ الْخَلْقُ عَلَيْهِمْ قُلِ اللَّهُ خَالِقُ كُلِّ  
شَيْءٍ وَهُوَ الْوَاحِدُ الْقَهَّارُ

Say, “Are the blind and sighted similar, or are the darkness and the light the same?” Or have they made for GOD associates who could create equivalents to His creation so that they appear alike to them? Say, “GOD is The Creator of all things; He is The One, The Conqueror.” (Q13:16)

فَدَلِكُمُ اللَّهُ رَبُّكُمْ الْحَقُّ فَمَاذَا بَعْدَ الْحَقِّ إِلَّا الضَّلَالُ

That is GOD, your Lord, The Truth. What is there after Truth but error? (Q10:32)

The latter quotation is not the only verse that identifies AL-LĀH with Truth and leaves a question mark hanging over everything else. Of course, other ‘things’ are called ‘the Truth’ as well, such as the Qur’ān itself, the Message brought by all the prophets, true statements in general, and how the heavens and earth were created. But none of these are true except as acts or manifestations of GOD. To think of them as independently true would be to attribute a partner in truthfulness with Him.

At the heart of our problem is a view of Reality that orthodox theology has always been reluctant to confront. Early Muslims had the good sense to keep the obvious implications of equating GOD with all Reality under cover, as it were. But when Maṣṣūrul-Ḥallāj (c. 858 – 922) (244 – 309 of the Islamic calendar) declared “I am the Truth,” he exposed the insoluble dilemma of expressing Absolute Truth in an ambiguous world. Though they are, ultimately, illusions, darkness and evil have their ‘place,’ and we cannot dispense with them by simply claiming to be God. Language, law, ethics, and a functioning society must make distinctions and continue to operate in an unclear, imperfect, and ultimately illusory world. And so Al-Ḥallāj was executed as a heretic. He had chosen the wrong context in which to express a truth that was absolute in his heart, where he was “*nought*,” but detrimental in a public forum. He was not content to let GOD continue “*softly working on*” his knot.

The Qur’ān was never intended for use solely by monists, mystics, monks, dervishes, and intellectuals. There are many passages that have an

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unmistakably monist tendency, but none of us can manage our lives without practical concessions to our dualist limitations. Most of us are not equipped to handle the abstractions that underpin the philosophy of perennialism or explore our capacity for a mystical union with the Divine. We all still depend on the rudiments of just getting on with things – eating, sleeping, studying, marrying, raising children, trading, making decisions, and generally dealing in the common coin of good and bad, right and wrong, and pain and pleasure. For this reason, the Qur’ān refers to itself as **al-Furqān (the Criterion) (Q25:1)**, that which distinguishes between true and false. AL-LĀH calls our attention to His signs in pairs – not only day, but also night, not only heaven but also earth – as if to tell us that we have to recognize and contend with partial truths before we face the Truth, the Whole Truth, and nothing but the Truth hereafter.

## 25.

# THE ELOQUENT SOLILOQUY<sup>AA</sup> OF GOD



To be All One, as AL-LĀH is, is to be Alone.

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Soliloquy: a character's communing with himself, thereby revealing his thoughts to an audience.

To be absolutely, infinitely Alone does not mean that GOD is lonely, or in need of companionship; indeed, His Aloneness is incomprehensibly true, beautiful, blissful, and sublime. Nothing can enhance it.

Only by nothing, therefore, can GOD be greater than He is Alone.

If I had anything but wordplay to account for His creation, I would use it, but explanation fails me here. I have no way to explain how all this – I myself, the world, revelation, et cetera – came to be.

It was like nothing for GOD to name Himself ... yet from that next-to-nothingness comes everything we know and are.

Before that – and when I say “before,” I do not mean a sequence of events – AL-LĀH as Absolute Subject was Unknowable.

The TAO that can be told of is not the eternal Tao;  
The name that can be named is not the eternal name.  
The Nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth;  
The Named is the mother of all things.<sup>5</sup>

This is why the first verse of the Qur’ān starts with **In the Name of GOD ...** . AL-LĀH precedes His Name, of course, but it is only from His Name that He is known. In His Absolute Subjectivity, He is Unmentionable, Nameless. To ‘know’ GOD, He must be named, however implicit the

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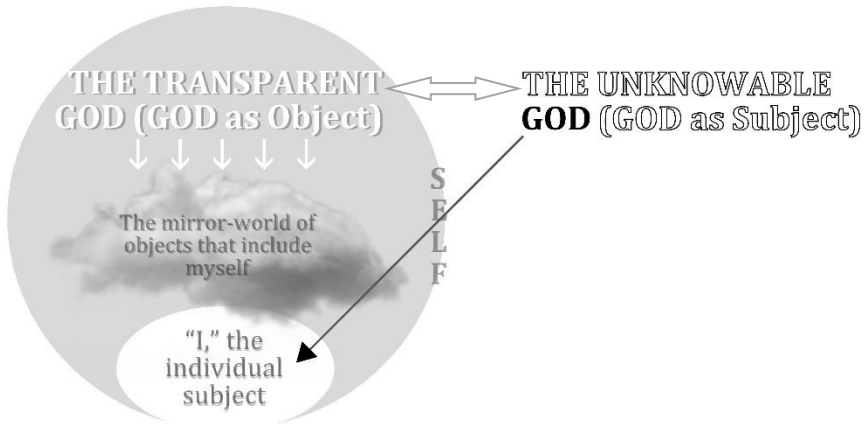
<sup>5</sup> Lao Tzu, *The Way of Lao Tzu (Tao-te Ching)*, translated by Wing-Tsit Chan, p. 97.

designation may be, and that act of naming is the first step out of His Unicity. AL-LĀH is One, but any statement of the form ‘A is A1’ is already a step beyond His Original, Ineffable Aloneness. In absolute terms, it is a step too far, for it posits GOD as Object or Predicate, where before there was only GOD as Subject ... and nothing more.

Are GOD-as-Subject and GOD-as-Object truly One? Absolutely ... but in asking that we have already strayed into the dualities underlying all speech, all naming, and all creation. In order to illustrate how this Divine Unicity<sup>BB</sup> works through the dualities implicit in things, I offer this schema:

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Reality is One. This diagram is meant only to help visualize ideas that represent the ambiguities inherent in our relationship to that Reality. Consider it to be nothing more than a depiction of how to explain to ourselves Divine Unicity generating the multiplicities of the created universe.



Although the details in this schema are important, they are neither precise nor categorical, nor should they be. They work best in a connotative cloud, where conceptual symbolism is most effective. The following table takes each element in the schema and expands on it to explain what it achieves defensively, in terms of coherence, and what it aims to accomplish dynamically, as a critique of our current intellectual environment:

FEATURE	COHERENCE	CRITIQUE
The Schema in its Entirety	In human discourse, the best possible frame is one that strives for the ultimate without claiming to have arrived. It must, however, be open to the Infinite, Who frames all our frames, and still account for our current experience of 'I'-ness, our values belonging to the supersensory world, and the world of phenomena where so much of our attention is disproportionately focused.	After over a century of rampant materialism, modern man is still thinking, discoursing, acting, feeling, and aspiring within worlds of meaning concerning which scientism has little that is meaningful, let alone valuable, to say. Yet materialism's proponents still consider it to be the only standard of truth. Robbed of spiritual principles, the denizens of our secular, science-worshipping society are demoralized, dispirited, and at a loss to explain how or why.
GOD as Subject	The best accounts regarding GOD are ones that affirm His Unicity while acknowledging, as in apophatic mysticism, that no human word or concept can be true to that Ineffable Truth. GOD as Subject is thus only a name for how it feels to be an Infinitely Omnipotent Agent, The Heart of All that is, and yet supremely Alone.	Billions of souls have passed and will continue to pass away in a universe that seems to quietly and carelessly dishonour our subjective need for importance and meaning. Without GOD, we die lonely but in droves, soon forgotten. AL-LĀH, though, graciously recalls our spirits to His Spirit, into His Singular Spiritual Peace, and so relieves us of the doubts, despair, and dread of death that haunt the modern world.
The Self	The Self is the threshold of transformation from the Unknown GOD of the mystics to the partially identifiable God of common theological discourse. It is also where subjects become known to themselves and a world of objects becomes possible. Although we currently <u>experience</u> the self individually, no one but GOD is entirely self-possessed. Rather we <u>participate</u> as contingent selves in His Absolute Selfhood, and receive a freedom of choice and belief proportionate to our power to act. We can then attribute that freedom to ourselves if we believe ourselves to be independent, or surrender that freedom to GOD, Who is its Original Owner.	As an object, the self is regarded as a thing that demands to be fed, like an animal, or needs to be dissected like a laboratory specimen. The best it can achieve is still portrayed as 'selfish.' As a subject, the 'selfless' self is mistakenly regarded either as one with the Divine (by mystics), or as an absolute in its own right in keeping with contemporary trends. Given its transience, on the one hand, and its Divine origin, on the other, I prefer to recast it as an <u>interface</u> between our dual experience of being both subject and object, both 'no-thing' and something. This ambiguity and fluidity could help soften the rigid egoism prevalent in modern society while retaining the absolutes that actually guide our actions and beliefs.



GOD as Object	In saying that we know GOD better than we know ourselves, I mean not only that GOD is The Transparent Object whose qualities appear in all that we perceive, but also that He is The Primal Object, the basis for there being any objects whatsoever.	Modern proponents of various ideals – freedom, reason, sustainability, et cetera – are like botanists who talk about branches and flowers but refuse to mention the Tree that constitutes both their unifying principle and the Cause, Ground, and End of their being.
The Individual “I”	This is our immanent Unknowable, the burning core that is our conscience, and the priceless token of our imminent return to eternal peace with GOD.	Bereft of a Spiritual Home, life in a merely material universe becomes a pageant of furious pleasure-seeking, egocentric goal-scoring, and drugs to blot out the pain of pointless being.
The Imaginal Mirror-World	The objects of this world are first conceived by GOD-as-Subject to reflect the qualities of GOD-as-Object, and as means for us to interact with Him. Each person then reconceives them to reflect his/her own self-as-object.	Physicalist science has never presented us facts, but only <u>experiences</u> that it interprets or <u>names</u> as facts. We do not perceive realities directly; rather we reconceive them to fit within our frames. Realizing that they are our creations is a first step to mastering them.

As we can see in the schema, **GOD** (i.e., “THE UNKNOWABLE **GOD**”) is in bold letters – and nothing else is. He is The Absolutely Real, The Infinitely Definitive. From our point of view, it seems that the opposite is true; for us, GOD as The Unknowable is certainly the least definite of concepts, the most ineffable. And as Subject, He is unknown even to Himself.

This last statement may seem heretical to some who react only to the sounds of words and choke on real meanings. But it should be clear to one who thinks that anything, to be known, must appear as an object of knowledge. And so, with GOD knowing Himself, the first step out of Perfect Unicity is taken, and what I call The Transparent GOD appears on our conceptual stage. There is no difference between the two other than, from our perspective, the formal or logical one of subject and object; as I said above, it is like nothing. It is the *as if* in this tradition: *Excellence is that you worship GOD as if you see Him [i.e., as an object], and if you cannot see Him, truly He [i.e., the subject] sees you.*

Is GOD an object, a circumscribed thing that can be seen or conceived in its entirety? No, of course not; He transcends all objects. But worship Him as if He is such an object. In other words, you have a definite moral order – *worship*. Now imagine an object worthy of that worship. Mentally create an object that corresponds to your highest absolute, while knowing

full well that it is not Him, but as close to Him as you can imagine. This imaginal object inhabits what I call the ‘mirror-world.’ I name it thus because it not only attempts to reproduce – unsuccessfully – the qualities of GOD but it also imitates His power to create things out of nothing. The command to worship and the dual creation – by Him and by us – are reflected in the verse, **Truly His are the Creation and Command. Blessed be AL-LĀH, The Master of the worlds! (Q7:54).** By His Creation, we have objects. And by His Command, we have values and obligations, transmitted from GOD-as-Subject to conscious subjects.

The transition from subject to object is accomplished through the Self. By having a Self, GOD presents Himself as an object which He and we can name; without this, references to AL-LĀH could not appear in the Qur’ān.

تَعْلَمُ مَا فِي نَفْسِي وَلَا أَعْلَمُ مَا فِي نَفْسِكَ إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ عَلَّامُ الْغُيُوبِ

**You know what is within my self, and I know not what is within Your Self. Indeed, You are The Knower of the hidden. (Q5:116)**

By having a Self, GOD can be simultaneously a totally Unknowable Subject and a partially Knowable Object (in Whose Transparency subsists one of His Names, **The Internal** or **Unseen**). Rather than being exclusively one or the other, the Self / self is an isthmus (*barzakh*) between subject and object, preserving ‘their’ single identity while opening up a conceptual space for reflexive acts such as self-knowledge and self-definition, and allowing for perfections that GOD in His Aloneness cannot have.

Keep in mind that there is no question here of temporal progression; rather GOD has always been both The Unknowable Subject and The Supreme Object of worship in the orthodox world-view:

وَيَبْقَى وَجْهُ رَبِّكَ ذُو الْجَلَالِ وَالْإِكْرَامِ

**And there remains the Visage of your Lord, possessing Majesty and Honour (Q55:27)**

The Self, moreover, provides a basis not only for superlatives but for personality.

قُلْ لِمَنْ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ قُلْ لِلَّهِ كَتَبَ عَلَى نَفْسِهِ الرَّحْمَةَ

**Say, “To whom belongs whatever is in heaven and on earth?” Say, “To GOD. He has ordained Compassion for Himself.” (Q6:12)**

There is a wealth of significance in this act of GOD attributing **Compassion** to Himself. How is this com-passion to be expressed, if not with passion, by a commitment to creating and sustaining objects that reflect and reproduce this passionate character? And thus we read:

وَلَا يَزَالُونَ مُخْتَلِفِينَ  
إِلَّا مَنْ رَحِمَ رَبُّكَ وَلِذَلِكَ خَلَقَهُمْ

**But they will never cease to be contentious, / Other than the ones to whom your Lord shows Mercy; and for that He did create them. (Q11:118-119)**

We were created to receive His Love – which is our initial experience after birth if we are born into a loving family – and then to transmit and reproduce it as both our love and more objects of compassion, such as our own children, and gain thereby some inkling of how it feels to be God. The purpose of creation is thus to become signs that point to GOD, in either one of two ways:

- 1) by receiving and ‘re-presenting’ His Names, particularly Mercy. To take an analogy from light, the sunlit side of a mountain testifies in its brighter hues to the brilliance of that light’s source. In loving – GOD, ourselves, and others – we reproduce His Love.
- 2) by refusing and negating His Names. Using the same analogy, the dark side or shadow of a mountain testifies to the sun by the shadow’s contrast (darker shade signifying a stronger light producing it), its length (indicating the sun’s height in the sky), and its direction (exactly opposite to where we should look to see the sun).

By GOD’s own Self, therefore, AL-LĀH produces objects that reflect, either directly by likeness or indirectly by contrast, His own object state, which is transparent to us. The objects of this mirror-world in which we live are here to reveal His Divine Names or attributes, the creative core of which is His Compassion.

But besides these **signs on the horizons**, AL-LĀH reveals Himself to humans in yet another fashion, **within themselves (Q41:53)**. He does this through what He calls **His Spirit: Then He proportioned him [the human being] and breathed His Spirit into him, and made for you your hearing, sight, and hearts. How little do you offer thanks! (Q32:9)** It is this Spirit in us that makes us active subjects (as indicated by **your hearing, sight, and hearts**). As subjects, we experience **a little** of the creative power and freedom of GOD as Subject.

Although His Subject state and our subject states are not the same, the affinity is nonetheless strong enough to prompt some individuals to make mystical claims of identity with The Divine. But the Qur’ān is reticent on this point when **They question you about the Spirit. Say, “The Spirit is derived from [or about] the order [or the business] of my Master, and no knowledge has been given you except a little.” (Q17:85)**

Why is the answer so deliberately vague? Why does it avoid the Vedantic formula of *tat tvam asi* (‘That thou art’)? The Qur’ān, I would suggest, is careful to avoid wording that could lead to the kind of spiritual boasting and deception that hucksters, charlatans, and cultists indulge in without sufficient regard for the greater good of the community. Considering how easily abused mention of **His Spirit** can be in monist declarations such as those of Al-Ḥallāj (“I am the Truth”), orthodox theologians and commentators tend to emphasize a ‘separatist’ version of monotheism. They would remind us that the angels are subjects even closer to GOD than ourselves, yet

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ عِنْدَ رَبِّكَ لَا يَسْتَكْبِرُونَ عَنْ عِبَادَتِهِ وَيُسَبِّحُونَهُ وَلَهُ  
يَسْجُدُونَ

**Truly in the presence of your Lord are those who have no pride that bars their serving Him, and they exalt Him, making their prostrations unto Him. (Q7:206)**

On the other hand, the devils are spiritual beings too, and subjects whose knowledge and other powers surpass ours, yet their arrogance and refusal to obey have earned them the worst of outcomes in Hell. Clearly, being spirited, whether in angelic, human, or satanic fashion, does not entitle one to claim outright divinity.

Our being both creatures and spiritual subjects is a wholly contingent state. That dependency is reiterated by the two relinquishments of self that we experience:

اللَّهُ يَتَوَفَّى الْأَنفُسَ حِينَ مَوْتِهَا وَالَّتِي لَمْ تَمُتْ فِي مَنَامِهَا فَيُمْسِكُ الَّتِي  
قَضَىٰ عَلَيْهَا الْمَوْتَ وَيُرْسِلُ الْأُخْرَىٰ إِلَىٰ أَجَلٍ مُّسَمًّى إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ  
لَآيَاتٍ لِّقَوْمٍ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ

**AL-LĀH takes back the souls upon their death, and those, undying yet, who sleep. He keeps the ones whose death He has ordained and sends the others back [to live] for an appointed term. Indeed in that are signs for people who reflect. (Q39:42)**

Though we can reflect on it, this subject state of ours is fundamentally unknowable; to ‘know’ it is to turn it into an object, and even then **no knowledge has been given you except a little**. As an object, moreover, I find myself unworthy of regard – sinful, error-prone, defective in every way, and currently declining towards decrepitude and death.

This intrinsic faultiness has a potential benefit. As a finite object, however many flaws I own, I can take comfort in having limited liability for my offences. My expiation for them should be as limited as I am myself – a statutory penalty for a statutory crime, let us say. But then, with the utmost shock and horror, I find in the Qur’ān that my punishment is potentially unlimited and everlasting.

ثُمَّ قِيلَ لِلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا ذُوقُوا عَذَابَ الْخُلْدِ هَلْ تُجْزَوْنَ إِلَّا بِمَا كُنْتُمْ تَكْسِبُونَ

**Then it is said to those who were unjust, “Taste the pain of everlastingness. Are you requited other than for what you earned?” (Q10:52)**

Surely the disproportion between my limited crimes and GOD’s unlimited punishment would be the height of injustice ... if the boundlessness of GOD were not in some sense mine as well. How could I **taste** anything without **His Spirit**? By betraying Him, I have somehow introduced a breach into the indissoluble unity between the rounded finitude of objects, of which I am one, and the expansive infinity of subjects, in which I participate by virtue of **His Spirit**. It is as if I initially had in my grasp, then ruined, and finally lost my own eternity. And yet nothing can truly destroy that Spirit, that permanence, for I am not just an object. (See Chapter 19 for the conditionality of an endless future in Hell.)

In horror movies, a fate worse than death itself is the terror of discovering oneself to be other than oneself – the unwilling host of an alien life form, a subject compelled to be the helpless tool of a malevolent other. This is the real horror of Hell – the excruciating realization that one has been and might forever be a living lie, and thus the enemy of one’s own True Self. Only when one has seen that Self, in all Its grandeur and beauty, does one realize how disastrous is the identity one has chosen instead. The self-loathing that ensues then will be indescribable. Our torment stems from an estrangement from our true identity. Thinking ourselves to be subjects independent of GOD (an illusion which orthodox theology does little to dispel in emphasizing our freedom and separateness from GOD), we find ourselves treated like outcasts from His Kingdom, the real universe.

يَوْمَئِذٍ يَوَدُّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا وَعَصَوُوا الرَّسُولَ لَوْ تُسَوَّى بِهِمُ الْأَرْضُ

**On that day, those who had denied and disobeyed the Messenger will wish that they were level with the earth. (Q4:42)**

It is in this extremity of despair and desolation that we hear GOD's final word on the matter:

عَذَابِي أُصِيبُ بِهِ مَنْ أَشَاءُ وَرَحْمَتِي وَسِعَتْ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ

**I unleash My punishment on whom I will. And My Compassion comprehends all things. (Q7:156)**

The scope of GOD's Compassion **comprehends all things**, and is ultimately not to be denied. Remembering our origins in His spoken Word, we eventually enter into His comprehension, like thoughts that come to mind after long years of forgetting.<sup>CC</sup> The Fire of *Con-scientia* (Latin for "knowledge within oneself") finally heals the breach, and we return ... to thoughts of Him.

CC

وَقِيلَ الْيَوْمَ نَنْسَاكُمْ كَمَا نَسِيتُمْ لِقَاءَ يَوْمِكُمْ هَذَا

**And it is said, "Today We shall forget you just as you forgot the meeting on this Day of yours." (Q45:34)**

Like so much else in the Qur'ān, we are not meant to take the 'forgetfulness' of AL-LĀH literally; to do so would be blasphemy. Rather it symbolizes a deficiency or 'shadow' in a creature's participation in the Life of GOD, which is concurrent with His Mindfulness.

In my mind there lurk memories so painful and thoughts so vile that I am unwilling to call them mine. But I cannot deny that I am their creator. I start, therefore, to work dissolving them in a deeper understanding and a desire to get to the bottom of them. It is as if they have a life of their own; they will not lie down and be still. They are like nothing, and yet in them I see myself as in a mirror.

Then, as I reflect upon the nature of the thoughts that live within me, I am reminded of the life I have in GOD.<sup>DD</sup> Without these thoughts of mine, I would be forever transparent to my inquiring subject-self; there would be no reflecting surface for introspection. Could I, then, likewise, be nothing more than a projection of One Who is Supremely Self-Aware,

DD

When spiritual adepts, mystics, and even those who have near-death experiences undergo states of bliss and cosmic consciousness, they are probably tapping into the vein of the Pure Subject-State of GOD in His Unicity. The Qur'ānic descriptions of Paradise may be intended to convey something of the endless ecstasy of this objectless identity – an experience that we cannot sustain insofar as we continue as objects. We have a comparable sensation of unity with the Divine when we are 'in the zone,' a foretaste of the freedom of GOD, which I mentioned in Chapter 3.

Knowing Himself not only by what He takes up as good and true but also by what He rejects as unworthy of The Divine Mind? Or should I say nothing less? Truly we have undervalued GOD and ourselves if we consider His thoughts (i.e., projections of His Intelligence) to be trivial things.

My thoughts have no independent life; I do not know them so well that I could create in them the power to think their own thoughts. AL-LĀH, on the other hand, is nearer to me than I am to my own thoughts. The power that I imagine granting to my thoughts so they could think freely He has actually given me; I did not develop it on my own (nor can I control it even now). Because of this affinity, this spirit of re-presentation, of created objects being turned into creative subjects, He takes **Our Affair (amrunā)** immensely seriously. Conscience is a serious business, felt like **Our Command (amrunā)**. Heaven is not just a 'better place'; it is seriously, stunningly beautiful and glorious beyond our wildest imaginations – **Our Pleasure**. And Hell is, likewise, terribly serious and real – what we would call so utterly painful as to be unreal. And there too, GOD knows Himself ... by what He is not.

As a subject, I am invisible to myself, like GOD the Unknowable Subject. And as object, I receive His Transparent character, and then reflect or hide it. My self (subject) contemplating my self (object) is thus subsumed in the Divine Self-Knowledge constantly revealing to Himself that **there is an identity: no other god** – no real duality of subject and object – **but The One GOD**.

لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ

## 26.

# STEPPING BACK FROM THE PICTURE



Imagine yourself within a place of worship. You are surrounded by all the elements that could enhance its atmosphere of sanctity – other worshippers, the lighting, the grandeur of the architecture, and whatever objects are commonly found in your place of prayer. Now close your eyes and remove them, one by one. Discard the flowers. Put out the candles. Take down the pictures. Block out all the shiny surfaces and ornaments. Efface the inscriptions. Hide the books. Eliminate every religious symbol. Then set to work upon the seats, the carpets, the walls, the windows, the lights, and even the other worshippers; delete them all. Now open your mind's eye and look around at who remains. Is GOD still there, or did you lose Him in the midst of all that subtraction?

Ideally, without all the trappings and accessories that typically clutter our idea of what faith means, you should be left with a clear, still serenity of Endless Presence. And if, moreover, you were able to subtract your own self from that scene, then the clarity of His Absolute Here-and-Now-ness should be that much more immediate and lasting. Anyone who has truly experienced this Presence knows that He is not an object in our minds; rather it is our minds that rise as objects within the luminescent field of His Transcendent Intellect as it shines through us, illuminating what we see before us as we stand before Him, gazing where He gazes.

وَاللَّهُ مِنْ وَرَائِهِمْ مُحِيطٌ

**And GOD is, from behind them, All-Encompassing. (Q85:20)**

I say this by way of preamble to bringing back the topic of framing. Whatever frame we may devise to explain what we believe, the final frame, the one that determines how all our frames will be encompassed and judged, belongs to the One Who comes at us from behind (i.e., where we can neither see Him nor frame Him).



The conditions for understanding this Absolute Frame are presented in the Qur'ān. No frame that negates its expansive and forceful message will be allowed to stand on the Day of Resurrection. For that reason, a reader of this work of mine, and in particular the previous chapter, may question why I do not simply declare the Qur'ān to be my frame, and dispense with all these "Ideas."

When ancient mariners observed the night sky, they affirmed the reality of what they saw. Attributing them to God's handiwork would make them His signs, and thus provide them a rudimentary frame, but other physical or polytheistic explanations were also prevalent. Mere sighting, however, would not suffice if they wanted to navigate by the stars. They would have to differentiate between the planets and the 'fixed' stars, record the regularities and discrepancies in their motions, and develop practical guidelines to account for changes related to the time of year and their own location on the surface of the Earth. In all these ways, therefore, the signs (i.e., the stars), required a conceptual framework if they were to be meaningful for navigators.

Modern astronomers, likewise, do not stop with merely noting the presence of the stars in the sky; their main concern is to compile detailed observations that lead to theories and comprehensive accounts of what the stars can tell us about, say, their physical and chemical composition, the age of the universe, or how planets such as ours are formed.

Acceptance of a sign is, therefore, only the first step in a process of multiple framings that, one after another, enhance its scope and explanatory power. This process is the very heart of the scientific enterprise, and each stage in it is essential to its increasing capacity to link the phenomenon or sign, whatever it is, to its ultimate Origin, namely GOD. What suffices for a believer, that the stars were created by God, and to glorify Him, should be honoured for having identified the true origin and purpose of the whole enterprise, even if it fails to fill in the cognitive gaps between what we see and what we claim to believe. The work of science is to patiently bridge those chasms in our understanding, and thus should be honoured by the believer even if scientists refuse to admit that GOD is their final goal. The signs, by themselves, do not suffice to guide us to GOD or any other understanding of Reality; it is by GOD's guiding us to interpret them that they acquire the power to point us toward the particular absolute that constitutes our framing principle and purpose.

I consider the verses of the Qur'ān to be analogous to stars that can be admired for their beauty and brilliance, but nonetheless do not provide the

same illumination as the blaze of ultimate Revelation on the Day of Judgment. They bear enough information for us to construct a coherent frame from their scintillating points, but that work can be accomplished, and has been accomplished, in many different ways. They can, moreover, be forced into a framework that construes them, as many unbelievers have done, to be the exhalations of a madman, the contrivances of a poet, or the distillation of various narratives and traditions endemic to sixth-century Arabia and its environs. In other words, the same signs that underlie a vibrant faith in AL-LĀH can also serve as the material for arguments against faith, for ridicule, distortion, and outright rejection.

The Qur’ān is not – and was not intended to be – a systematic corpus of the type we would publish as a textbook nowadays. Just as an ancient mariner interpreted the stars quite otherwise than a modern astronomer does, so do the traditional frameworks of jurisprudence (*fiqh*), history (*sīrah*), exegesis (*tafsīr*), and dogmatics (*‘aqīdah*) offer frames of interpretation that sufficed for the intellectual demands of those times but may not be particularly relevant or convincing for these latter days of ours. Most of us, myself included, have grown up and been educated in a *zeitgeist* that is skeptical or dismissive of religious truth and continues to intellectually, culturally, economically, and technologically dominate the entire planet. This Western, technical, materialistic, and secular outlook has embedded its framing mechanisms so deeply in our collective and individual psyches, and in our practical, day-to-day lives, that we have immense difficulty absorbing, let alone comprehending, alternative pictures of reality, such as those of the Qur’ān.

These “Ideas,” therefore, are simply a transitional framework – and I do mean ‘work’ – by which I hope to better appreciate and understand the greater framework of AL-LĀH. Simply wanting to understand, however much I may want it, is no guarantee of actual understanding. We can pray for enlightenment or Paradise, but to claim it is just another scheme to advance one’s illusory sense of self as someone special or entitled.

لَيْسَ بِأَمَانِيكُمْ

**It [GOD’s promise to believers] will not be what you desire. (Q4:123)**

قَالَتِ الْأَعْرَابُ آمَنَّا قُلْ لَمْ تُؤْمِنُوا وَلَكِنْ قُولُوا أَسْلَمْنَا وَلَمَّا يَدْخُلِ  
الْإِيمَانُ فِي قُلُوبِكُمْ

The desert Arabs say, “We have believed.” Tell [them], “You do not have faith, but say, ‘We have submitted’; faith has not yet come into your hearts.” (Q49:15)

In other words, contrary to modern popular advertising that claims ‘you can be whatever you want,’ I have to face the grim reality of being out of sync with the Qur’ānic frame, or at least the picture traditionally associated with it, and confront my lack of understanding. I must honestly acknowledge the gaps between what I actually affirm, as evidenced in how I think, feel, and live, moment by moment, and what constitutes real faith in GOD.

Faith without the conceptual framework to corroborate it soon becomes the basis of a double, dissociated life. I see it every day among the Muslims who constantly read the Qur’ān and remain (blissfully?) unaware of how little of it they actually adhere to or implement in their daily lives. My situation is not much different (but without the bliss), which is why I continually remind myself: **It will not be what you desire.**

Intellectual ruthlessness, one could say, is what compels me to this practice of self-conviction – both accusing and convincing myself of what the claims against me will be when I finally face the Truth. By enunciating these “Ideas,” I am striving to erect a scaffolding for the real work that is going on inside. Once the building is complete (and that will not happen until GOD calls for it to end), then these “Ideas” – these scraps of mental lumber temporarily tied together – can be discarded. In the meantime, they are the only semi-coherent frame I can honestly say I understand.

Time and time again in the Qur’ān, we read of prophets and role models (including Maryam, the mother of ‘Īsā, on whom be peace) who, when chosen for their faith, sought to understand as well, to make sense of the messages conveyed to them.

وَإِذْ قَالَ إِبْرَاهِيمُ رَبِّ أَرِنِي كَيْفَ تُحْيِي الْمَوْتَى قَالَ أُولَمْ تُؤْمِنُ قَالَ  
بَلَىٰ وَلَٰكِنْ لِّيَطْمَئِنَّ قَلْبِي

**When Ibrāhīm said, “Master, show me how you bring the dead to life,” He said, “Have you no faith?” He answered, “Certainly [I do; I only ask], however, that my heart may be at peace.” (Q2:260)**

In other words, a faith that is grounded in what the mind can see and hold conceptually is a firmer faith, one that can take root in all the faculties of the human being instead of huddling, like potted plants, in the sectarian hothouses, shrines, and churches of our world. A strong frame for our faith is not only a good defence, a bulwark against the secular storms that assail all believers nowadays, but also reliable armour for the times when we advance into enemy territory. Even the Prophet (may GOD bless him and give him peace) put on armour before going into battle. In this era, for

believers, the supreme battle is intellectual and spiritual, but our so-called leaders are mostly unprepared to wage the only war – the *jihād* of the mind and soul – that can make a difference to the majority of mankind nowadays.

The retreat of faith in God from the foreground of human endeavour to its margins and wastelands is in large part due to its inability to provide a viable, intellectually formidable account of why it should be at the centre of our lives. Modern science, for its part, has done much worse, but seems brilliant because it has provided an account of how things are instead of the vastly more important question of why things are. To souls that hunger for spiritual bread it has given nothing but stones ... and then, in the voices of secular materialism, boasted about the culinary qualities of stones.

Constructing frames to make sense of our lives and what we believe is something all of us do, all the time. What we do naturally might as well be done compellingly. My aim, therefore, is to make this frame, the conceptual structure of this book, substantial, coherent, and effective on as many levels as possible, primarily for myself. When it can incorporate the message of the Qur'ān in a way that answers my needs and addresses the challenges thrown at us by the world, it has served its purpose. Then, when I am struggling no longer, I can put that armour aside and return to my Lord, with Whom my final doubts will be resolved in peace.<sup>EE</sup>

#### EE

One common misconception about the Qur'ān, and hence one that almost certainly affects any reading of this book as well, is that the Qur'ān should corroborate our current versions of material or historical reality, and so can be or should be subjected to the ordinary processes of scientific or historical verification. Are there really seven heavens, which were fashioned in two days? Are there beings actually made of smokeless fire? Did Mūsā (peace be upon him) actually lead his people through the Red Sea? Was there really a first man, Ādam, the father of all mankind? Where are Hell and Paradise located?

People who conduct these investigations think that if they can discover any detail in the Qur'ān that does not correspond to the latest scientific findings, then they have proved it to be false, that is, not from GOD. The same type of judgement is used with regard to social or moral issues, such as references to women, war, slaves, or 'barbaric' punishments that offend our contemporary norms. But norms continuously change, and so do the findings of science.

Once we begin to accept these alternative frames as standards, there

EE (continued)

is no end to them, and we are left with a whirlwind of doubts about everything except our own judgements. Rather our questions should be: How does the Qur'ān raise the mind and soul of the reader into a state of constant readiness to face Infinite Truth? Can we learn, by way of His Book, how to affirm His Transcendental Oneness and, through Him, the ultimate beauty and rightness of His creation, regardless of our present conditions and points of view? Can we discover in His Book our immanent affinity with Him, and return to GOD both pleased with and pleasing to Him?

27.

## CLOSING THE GAP BETWEEN FAITH AND FACTS



As you read these thoughts about GOD, Truth, creation, subjects, objects, and so on, you may well wonder what good any of it is for our day-to-day lives. What difference does it make whether we believe this or that about the world, when the upshot is that we go on living the same way? The famous historian (now much discredited, unfortunately) who wrote *The Decline of the West* made the same point, and with greater flair and vehemence. With his typical magisterial disdain, Oswald Spengler<sup>FF</sup> pronounces his verdict on what he considers the pseudo-life of the mind:

FF

I am quoting Spengler here because he makes his point about practicality versus theory more forcefully than anyone I know, and does it with a stentorian *élan* and stimulating disregard for polite opinion that I have long enjoyed. I first discovered him in my twenties while living abroad, and he remains one of my favourite authors, despite his obvious arrogance and bias, academic missteps, and inclination to over-generalize. I cannot help but admire his audacious rhetoric and the thrust and flow of his ideas; they remind me of the same stern tone of fearless passion for truth that we find in the Qurʾān.

There are born destiny-men and causality-men. A whole world separates the purely living man ... from the man who is destined either by the power of his mind or the defect of his blood to be an "intellectual" – the saint, priest, savant, idealist, or ideologue ... .

Destiny has made the man so or so – subtle and fact-shy, or active and contemptuous of thought. But the man of the active category is

a whole man, whereas in the contemplative a single organ can operate without (and even against) the body. All the worse, then, when this organ tries to master actuality as well as its own world, for then we get all those ethico-politico-social reform-projects [*sic*] which demonstrate, unanswerably, how things ought to be and how to set about making them so ... . Such theories, even when they have taken the field armed with the full authority of a religion or the prestige of a famous name, have not in one single instance effected the slightest alteration in life. They have merely caused us to *think* otherwise than before about life ... .

For, in the last resort, only the active man, the man of destiny, lives in the *actual* world, the world of political, military, and economic decisions, in which concepts and systems do not figure or count ... .

Men of theory commit a huge mistake in believing that their place is at the head and not in the train of great events ... . He [i.e., the man of theory] belongs with his principles and programs to no history but the history of a literature. Real history passes judgement on him not by controverting the theorist, but by leaving him and all his thoughts to himself. A Plato or a Rousseau – not to mention the smaller intellects – could build up abstract political structures, but for Alexander, Scipio, Caesar, and Napoleon, with their schemes and battles and settlements, they were entirely without importance. The thinker could discuss destiny if he liked; it was enough for these men to be destiny.<sup>6</sup>

Spengler's pontifical style of emphasis and exaggeration is on full display here, but he nevertheless manages to clear away the low-lying intellectual shrubbery that conceals what many contemporary leaders probably believe about themselves and their mastery of events. You will not find this kind of discourse in today's mass media, for to admit it would be to negate the very purpose of the media. To discover it in any book is refreshing ... and unsustainable. It ultimately refutes itself, and Spengler manages to render his sweeping statements absurd in the very act of making them.

What does it mean to make "decisions, in which concepts and systems do not figure or count"? How can one decide anything without the aid of concepts or conceptual structures, (i.e., systems)? When an act takes place

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<sup>6</sup> Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, translated by C. F. Atkinson, vol. 2, pp. 16–18 *passim*.

in the heat of the moment, without a conscious theory backing it up, the concepts that come into play are merely those that one never questions because they lie more deeply in one's disposition and habits.

Or again, if "real history" metaphorically "passes judgement" on a thought by leaving it behind, then what about the course that it does take? Was there not an alternative set of thoughts – perhaps only affirmation of the status quo or the calculations of self-interest – informing that judgement as well? Maybe the abstractions of Plato are too rarefied to be applied in the "actual world." But is the rough-and-ready practice of countless minds agreeing on a path of least resistance, based on their experience, any less conceptual? A principle is no less a principle for being unwritten and by consensus, and a scheme conceived by Alexander or Napoleon is still a program.

The truth of the matter is that there is no matter without its 'truth,' that is, an idea that informs it and makes it sensible. Facts, actions, life, history, destiny – none of these even exist without an intellectual component whereby they are recognized and reconceived according to the mind of the conceiver, no matter how humble or practical he may be. <sup>GG</sup>

Notice also – and all proponents of 'actuality' do this despite themselves – how Spengler soaks his prose in value-heavy language that belies

GG

When I hear someone proclaim the reign of facts, which are, supposedly, nothing more than the evidence of our senses, I feel like shouting, "Fine. Show me a fact – a plain and simple fact."

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All right; here's one: ice is frozen water.

"I see the liquid water, I see the solid ice, and I can witness the transformation of one to the other. But show me the fact itself – not an example of one."

– What? I'm not talking about a thing *per se*, but an objective consensus about reality.

"That's great. But since you claim that nothing is reliable but sensory evidence, I want to see that consensus. What colour is a fact?

– Don't be silly; 'fact' is just a word.

"But each language has its own word for it. Present to my senses that reality which the whole world agrees on, independent of the sounds that all those words make."

– Nonsense; what matters is the general concept, the meaning.



## GG (continued)

"You're absolutely right. So ask those fact-filled friends you've just disavowed to serve their meaning on a plate for me to taste. Have them play for me the *pizzicato* of their knowledge. I want to wake up and smell the proof, and feel the crunch of truth between my teeth."

\*\*\*\*

Let's face it: we are so immersed in the supersensory realm, where we effortlessly find our meanings, knowledge, truth, and facts, we won't really appreciate it until, like a careless fish, we are hauled out of it (and put on the grill).

his passion for facts. (Indeed, if it arouses passion, it is no longer just a fact.) He contrasts the "purely living man" with the "intellectual," and associates the latter with a "defect of his blood." This sets the stage for a whole host of contrasts between "life" and things such as "thoughts" that, without his saying it outright, constitute a stand-in for death in this passage. If history, however, is nothing more than a sequence of events, and destiny is just another word for what the end-point of that sequence looks like, I see no value, and not necessarily even life, in it. We could call the geological history of Earth 'real history' and describe its scorching destruction by the sun several billion years hence as our destiny. Even to prefer the history of a human being over the history of a fruit fly is to activate values that are not inherent in the subject matter.

When Spengler compares "life" and "the whole man" to the contemplative with his single organ, relegating him to "no history but the history of a literature ... leaving him and all his thoughts to himself," and "without importance," we are witnessing how "real history" is actually code not for a dispassionate series of facts, but rather for a set of values that claim to be about actuality and are really all about power. This talk about facts is actually just a disguise, one that ironically enhances the value of its claims by their supposed value-free objectivity.

It is time for today's physicalists and advocates of scientism in all its forms to abandon the pretence that facts are somehow superior to or prior to values, or that we can derive values from facts. Not only does it require a value – validity, relevance, significance, et cetera – to even recognize a fact, the very essence of a fact is that it takes us nowhere, let alone to a higher level. The value of any tool – a wrench, for example – consists in its being entirely subordinate to the use I make of it. By itself, without the

aims and values which I possess, and which I have applied to designing or choosing it, it remains utterly dumb and inert. This inertness is precisely what makes it so useful; it conforms without resistance to my higher purpose.

All facts (except AL-LĀH, The Absolutely Factual) are tools, and are valued (i.e., given a value) for the same reason, namely that they have no agenda or value of their own. That is what makes them objective. They are utilized because they have no intrinsic value.<sup>HH</sup> How mendacious, then, is it to turn around and convert their being value-free objects into a value *per se*, and proceed to use that to dictate what values we should have! And yet this intellectual sleight of hand has become so common that we no longer even think of calling it by its proper name – a gross deception.

HH

Nate Silver makes the same point in another way:

This exponential growth in information is sometimes seen as a cure-all ... that the sheer volume of data would obviate the need for theory, and even the scientific method. [...] [T]hese views are badly mistaken. The numbers have no way of speaking for themselves. We speak for them. We imbue them with meaning. [...] Data-driven predictions can succeed – and they can fail. It is when we deny our role in the process that the odds of failure rise. Before we demand more of our data, we need to demand more of ourselves. [page 11]

Meanwhile, if the quantity of information is increasing by 2.5 quintillion bytes per day, the amount of *useful* information almost certainly isn't. Most of it is just noise, and the noise is increasing faster than the signal. There are so many hypotheses to test, so many data sets to mine – but a relatively constant amount of objective truth.\* [page 13]

\*Nate Silver, *The Signal and the Noise*, pp. 11 passim and 13.

As a historian, Spengler is very much concerned with power, and so he should be. It is the stuff of history – human history, that is. Having power is a fact. Not having power is also a fact. But how could I prefer one over the other, or call one "life" and the other a "defect," without a prior value, and without all that values entail for rational creatures – concepts, thoughts, systems, and so on?

Later in his book, Spengler partially corrects himself by juxtaposing actuality and truth in one of his most telling passages:

But when Jesus was taken before Pilate, then *the world of facts and the world of truths were face to face in immediate and implacable hostility*. It is a scene appallingly distinct and overwhelming in its symbolism, such as the world's history had never heard before and has never since looked at ... . In the famous question of the Roman Procurator: "What is truth?" – the one word that is race-pure in the whole Greek Testament – lies *the entire meaning of history*, the exclusive validity of the deed, the prestige of the State and war and blood, the all-powerfulness of success and the pride of eminent fitness. Not indeed the mouth, but the silent feeling of Jesus answers this question by that other which is decisive in all things of religion – *What is actuality?* For Pilate actuality was all; for him nothing ... .

No faith yet has altered the world, and no fact can ever rebut a faith. There is no bridge between directional Time and timeless Eternity, between the *course* of history and the *existence* of a divine world-order, in the structure of which the word "providence" or "dispensation" denotes the form of causality. *This is the final meaning of the moment in which Jesus and Pilate confronted one another ... .*

*Religion is, first and last, metaphysic, other-worldliness (Jenseitigkeit), awareness in a world of which the evidence of the senses merely lights the foreground. It is life in and with the supersensible. And where the capacity for this awareness, or even the capacity for believing in its existence, is wanting, real religion is at an end. "My kingdom is not of this world," and only he who can look into the depths that this flash illumines can comprehend the voices that come out of them.*<sup>7</sup>

Despite placing "truth" and "actuality" face to face and having them question each other as equals, Spengler has not advanced "actuality" in the slightest. He is, after all, one of the "men of theory" whom he disparages in the first quotation, who only think and never lead. And if "truth" is not his goal, then why bother to write at all? He seems to regard "truth" as something so angelically delicate that it cannot coexist with facts.

Men of truth, however, contend with "actuality" not as an opponent but as yet another disclosure of the Divine, where Light reveals its reach in

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<sup>7</sup> Spengler, vol. 2, pp. 216–217 passim.

every shade of colour and every shadow, no matter how intense. They work on the wellsprings of men's actions, which are the values and concepts that form their goals and delineate their hopes and fears. What motivates the rebellious adolescent artist, if not the dreams of what she could be? What spurs the young entrepreneur, if not the lure of ambition? What incentive does the scheming politician have to run for office, if not the hope of power and praise? What drives the aging star to keep on playing, if not pride, the solace of feeling 'he's still got it'? And what impels the elderly retiree to retell her achievements to all passersby, if not the thought that this was the real value and meaning of her life? What actually lives in all these people, if not "life in and with the supersensible"?

In all these snapshots from real lives, we see the power, not of facts, but faith – faith in the future, faith in the rewards of success, faith in the stories we tell ourselves, faith in the system, or faith in our legacy. Facts are shards of 'just a moment ago' that we use to fill a frame, but faith is that frame, and all the frames that enclose it in ever-larger dimensions of endless affirmation.

Actuality has, therefore, no world of its own. But it is not "nothing" ... only because, as I have said repeatedly, it is permeated with the Infinite. The truth saves facts from being only facts.<sup>11</sup> And so there can be no parity between them, just as there is no parity between Jesus and Pilate.

## II

Throughout this book, I contend that facts are not value-free, but rather that our concepts and values inform them and enable us to identify them as facts. The reverse of that needs to be confirmed as well, namely that values are not fact-free. Values are always 'about' something; that something belongs to a world receptive to our grasp of it, like a tool in the hand.

Values and facts are clearly different domains, but they are constantly coming together as natural complements. We could liken their relationship to that between mind and matter, or spirit and body, or what I first discussed in Chapter 7, namely command (**amr**) and creation (**khalq**). Our values cannot dictate to us what the facts are, nor are there value-free facts that can tell us what our morals or faith should be.

لَا يَغُرَّتْكَ تَقَلُّبُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا فِي الْبِلَادِ  
مَتَاعٌ قَلِيلٌ ثُمَّ مَأْوَاهُمْ جَهَنَّمُ وَبِئْسَ الْمِهَادُ

**Let not the unbelievers' goings-on around the country fool you – / Trifling pleasures, then their home is Hell, and what an evil place to rest it is! (Q3:196–197)**

That, too, is actuality, and no less real for our not having realized it yet.

Religion, in the Qur'ān, is not "other-worldly." That is because facts and truth are inseparable, both in the here-and-now we think we know and in the Everafter we think we do not know (and we are wrong on both counts). This is why **those who believe and do good deeds** is the constant refrain of the Qur'ān; we see it about as often as we read of **those who believe** alone. The prophets and messengers were not "men of theory" in Spengler's sense of the word; they were not busy writing books and spinning concepts, but rather going out into the markets and the thoroughfares, meeting their countrymen face to face, and speaking of what was closest to their hearts – their hopes, fears, and ultimate destinies. In dealing with spiritual beings, nothing could be more practical than that.

When you invade a country or introduce a new technology, you activate new chains of events, but you do not alter the underlying natures of the people you have conned or conquered. Humans are deeper than that. It is those underlying natures – their *fiṭrah* – that determine not only what they believe but in what frame they will place your government or gadget.

If religious faith fails to move the mass of mankind nowadays, that is because other forms of faith – in progress, or science, or the environment, or personal gain (whatever the latest creed happens to be) – have taken hold of their hearts and put down roots that no amount of heavenly rain can wash away. The intransigence of humanity in all ages is not a sign that faith is useless or has no impact, but rather that it functions too well, works profoundly, and has effects that are hard to reverse.

If these "Ideas" of mine do not 'work,' I regard that simply as a sign that the field is crowded, and hearts (not least my own) are hardened by the constant bombardment of contrary messages, surrounded by frames that are more appealing because they are more familiar and have had longer to operate. The world is full of faiths that are manifesting their power in every aspect of our lives.

That, one could say, is yet another fact. By itself, it has minimal value. So I will continue to write.

## 28.

# FRAMING SCIENCE AND THE MYTH OF PROGRESS



Where does science fit within the Qur’ānic framework? Is it the hero or the villain in the narrative we have heard so often, the clash between it and religion?

Since the world and the Qur’ān are equally authored by GOD, there is no conflict between *‘ilm* (knowledge or science) if rightly understood and *dīn* (religion)<sup>JJ</sup> if rightly understood. Both nature and scripture are books that demonstrate the creative and educative power of the Word.

JJ

Linguistic purists will object to my use of “religion” as a translation of *dīn*. I admit the shortfall, since *dīn* comprehends not only what we in the West limit religion to but also the ways of life, culture, law, and government that accompany and express in other forms the principles of the faith. Still, there is no other word in English that comes any closer to capturing the whole range of meaning in *dīn*, and the difference is not so great as to abandon the rendering altogether for the sake of scholastic rigour.

قُلْ اَنْظُرُوا مَاذَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْاَرْضِ وَمَا تُغْنِي الْاَيَاتُ وَالنَّذْرُ  
عَنْ قَوْمٍ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ

Say, “Look at what is in the heavens and the earth.” But neither signs nor those who warn will profit people who do not believe. (Q10:101)

The same word – *āyāt* – is used throughout the Qur’ān to refer to natural phenomena, psychic states, and the verses of the Qur’ān itself. All are signs of GOD, so there can be no fundamental contradiction among them.

Notice that the verse clearly indicates that knowledge of **the heavens and the earth** (i.e., all visible phenomena) by itself is of no value if not accompanied by what bestows that value, namely faith. And the tradition below not only emphasizes the same principle but also mentions the traits that are likely to render such knowledge useless.

عَنْ عَبْدِ اللَّهِ بْنِ عَمْرٍو أَنَّ النَّبِيَّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ كَانَ يَتَعَوَّذُ مِنْ  
أَرْبَعٍ مِنْ عِلْمٍ لَا يَنْفَعُ وَمِنْ قَلْبٍ لَا يَخْشَعُ وَدُعَاءٍ لَا يُسْمَعُ وَنَفْسٍ لَا  
تَسْبَعُ

*From ‘Abdil-Lāhib-ni ‘Amrin, that the Prophet (may GOD bless him and give him peace) used to seek refuge from four things – from knowledge that is useless, from a heart that is not humble, from a prayer that is not heard [i.e., by GOD], and a soul that is not satisfied.*

*(Sunanun-Nasā’ī, Book 50, Ḥadīth 50)*

On the other hand, the assertion that the types of knowledge associated with modern science, such as astronomy, biology, and medicine, need, because of their secular nature, to be governed by the principles of the faith can also be taken too far.

The study of law (*fiqh*) was more stifling for Arabic science than developments in theology. The eleventh century saw changes in Islamic law that discouraged heterodox thought: lack of orthodoxy could now be regarded as apostasy from Islam (*zandaqa*) which is punishable by death, whereas before, a Muslim could only apostatize by an explicit declaration. (Al-Ghazālī himself only regarded the violation of three core doctrines as *zandaqa*, statements that challenged monotheism, the prophecy of Muḥammad, and resurrection after death.) Given that heterodox thoughts could be interpreted as apostasy, this created a stifling climate for Arabic science. In the second half of the nineteenth century, as science and technology became firmly entrenched in Western society, Muslim empires were languishing or colonized. Scientific ideas, such as evolutionary theory, were equated with European colonialism, and thus met with distrust.

In spite of this negative association between science and Western modernity, there is an emerging literature on science and religion by Muslim scholars (mostly scientists). The physicist Nidhal Guessoum (2009) holds that science and religion are not only compatible, but in harmony. He rejects the idea of treating the Qur’ān as a scientific

encyclopedia, something other Muslim authors in the debate on science and religion tend to do, and he adheres to the no-possible-conflict principle, outlined by Ibn Rushd (Averroes): there can be no conflict between God’s word (properly understood) and God’s work (properly understood).<sup>8</sup>

The scholars of the eleventh century were probably inclined to systemic overreach – trying to impose the framing style of one book, Scripture, on another book, Nature – while AL-LĀH clearly intended that the two books serve as counterweights and complements to each other. This same overconfidence in the ‘success’ of one’s own system seems to be driving a similar overreach today in the opposite direction: demanding that Scripture conform to the framework of Nature. The Qur’ān, however, leaps over the supposed incompatibility between faith and science in one short passage:

قُلْ سِيرُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ فَانظُرُوا كَيْفَ بَدَأَ الْخَلْقَ ثُمَّ اللَّهُ يُنشِئُ النَّشْأَةَ  
الْآخِرَةَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ

**Say, “Go forth upon the Earth and see how He began creation; then AL-LĀH brings forth a final genesis. Indeed AL-LĀH has power over everything.” (Q29:20)**

The ‘seeing how’ is the work of science, expressed as a command to action, while acceptance of the ‘bringing forth’ is faith. The wording of this verse reveals how each confirms and supports the other, for both manifest GOD’s creative power. They are two ‘arms’ of a single, grand, ongoing experiment.

I use the word “experiment” advisedly, albeit with the same irony GOD employs. AL-LĀH has complete and prior knowledge of His universe; we could even describe the material universe as His ‘body’ of knowledge, or the part of His Knowledge that is expressed physically. But, in the Qur’ān, He often presents His signs as they appear from our point of view, which is limited in innumerable ways and, in particular, blind to the future. An experiment is one way by which scientists seek to interrogate that future, which for them is theoretically unknown. GOD, to Whom nothing is unknown, nonetheless speaks to us as if He also wants to know,

<sup>8</sup> *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ‘Religion and Science,’ section 2.2.



by way of encouraging us to want to know. In other words, He is the Principal Investigator, and invites us to be co-investigators in a matter of burning interest – ourselves.

ثُمَّ جَعَلْنَاكُمْ خَلَائِفَ فِي الْأَرْضِ مِنْ بَعْدِهِمْ لِنَنْظُرَ كَيْفَ تَعْمَلُونَ

**Then We made you representatives on Earth succeeding them that We might see how you behave. (Q10:14)**

ثُمَّ بَعَثْنَاهُمْ لِنَعْلَمَ أَيُّ الْحِزْبَيْنِ أَحْصَى لِمَا لَبِثُوا أَمَدًا

**Then we raised them [from their sleep] that We might know which one of the two groups could better estimate how long they tarried. (Q18:12)**

So closely aligned is the modern concept of science with the experiment that we have come to believe that contemporary science invented the experimental method. But the chief components of an experiment can be applied to any body of knowledge, including the Qur’ān itself. Whatever we intend to interrogate for answers, whether they lie in the future, the past, a book, or the soul of man, requires us to follow more or less the same procedure, although not always in the order provided here:

	A SCIENTIFIC EXPERIMENT	A STUDY OF THE QUR’ĀN	EXAMINATION OF A SOUL
Question	Does water freeze faster when sugar is added to it? <sup>9</sup>	Is the Qur’ān compatible with the modern secular world view?	When a soul is given all its material needs, and wealth and power besides, does it become more virtuous?
Hypothesis	If sugar is added to water, then it will freeze faster.	If ten leading secular doctrines and ten main tenets of the Qur’ān are compared, major discrepancies should appear.	If a nation is granted extraordinary material gifts, most of its members will become proud and spoiled, and lose their spiritual values.

<sup>9</sup> <https://examples.yourdictionary.com/scientific-method-examples.html>

Test Design and Implementation	Place two containers of water, one containing a measured amount of sugar and the other no sugar, in a freezer. At regular intervals, remove both containers and compare the degree of freezing in each until both are completely frozen.	List the central tenets of modern secularism (as corroborated by present-day leaders of mainstream thought) and place them beside the main doctrines of the Qur'ān as determined by scholars of the past (i.e., ones not influenced by modern culture). Try to arrange them by topics whereby similarities and differences would be visible (e.g., modern secular justice versus justice in the Qur'ān).	Select a group of people who are generally poor and downtrodden, and let them find sources of immense wealth beneath their feet (e.g., modern Arabia), in trade (e.g., medieval Venice), through war and plunder (e.g., medieval Mongolia), or by hard work and discipline (e.g., modern Japan). Note how their character changes as they grow affluent.
Data Collection	Record the times when the water was observed and how advanced the freezing process was in each container at each time.	Plot the two strands of thought on a chart that encompasses various other important credal traditions (e.g., 19th-century Arab nationalism, Thai Buddhism from the pre-Ratanakosin period, and Edwardian High-Church Anglicanism).	Observe how the behaviour, morals, and piety of the people change during this period of growth. Compare these factors with those of nations whose conditions remain poor, or whose circumstances decline.
Conclusion	The presence of sugar in water does not hasten the rate of freezing, but rather delays it.	The world views of the Qur'ān and modern secularism are too far apart to be termed compatible at any level but a superficial one common to virtually all faiths.	For the majority of a nation whose material condition improves, traditional values are replaced by a sense of entitlement, hedonism, individualism, and intellectual arrogance.

In each example of what could be termed the scientific method (albeit with varying degrees of precision consonant with the subject matter), the examiner is working on facts, and the outcome is simply new facts, higher-tier facts, or meta-facts. The whole process is only a tool, just as facts are only tools.

This process, however impressive it may be in general, does not by itself validate the frame in which the process takes place. An experiment with freezing water and sugar assumes the validity of materialism to prove its point, and therefore does not prove the validity of materialism itself. The process of studying the contents of the Qur'ān is not what validates it; rather it is the Qur'ān's specific contents that argue for its truth. And in the same way, an inquiry into the development or degradation of national morals will not convince us that virtue is superior to decadence.

Every experiment, and indeed every rational inquiry, begins with a frame of assumptions that govern what can be investigated, on the one hand, and what is excluded from questioning, on the other. The modern scientific enterprise has declared its frame to be physical phenomena, and set the conditions for investigating them, which is only right and proper ... within that frame. But the success of this venture within the physicalist frame has somehow deluded its proponents into thinking either that there is nothing knowable outside it, or that the facts they find within can be extrapolated beyond the frame, almost as if there were no frame there at all. They may also dismiss other frames as being too 'fuzzy' to be taken seriously.

In the chart above, some critics may complain that the examples provided are not strictly commensurate or comparable. We know what water is, and what freezing looks like, but how do we identify a "doctrine"? How can we determine a "tradition"? What is "character"? What are the parameters of "arrogance"? Implicit in all such questions is the assumption that if we cannot define something in physical terms it deserves less respect and attention.

Not only does a fact in physics, for example, look and behave very differently than a fact in, say, anthropology, but the demand for hard facts like those of physics tends to wear away at the fabric of inquiries into 'softer' disciplines, including studies of the Qur'ān itself, distorting our investigative priorities, minimizing our awareness of the supersensory frames that we need to apply, and characterizing our findings in those fields as mere feelings and questions of power and privilege. As a result, we find modernists, feminists,<sup>KK</sup> and revisionists of all sorts making headstrong attempts to tilt the field of Qur'ānic interpretation, fuelled perhaps by the thought that if there are no hard, materialistic standards then there are no authoritative standards at all. It is such assumptions as these that have led to the supposed clash between religion and science. In the face of this, we are compelled to constantly repeat that there are as many kinds of science (*'ilm*) as there are kinds of inquiry.

KK

There are two main ways modernists interpret the Qur'ān. One is to believe that the modern *zeitgeist* is true and that the Qur'ān is true, and therefore that the Qur'ān is a 'modern' document, that is, it validates contemporary assumptions about what is true and false, right and wrong, et cetera. Another way is to discard the second belief, (i.e., that the Qur'ān is true), and proceed to reject the Book insofar as it does not conform to modernity.

Feminism is one specific form of modernity. Some feminists believe that the Qur'ān is true, and therefore attempt to prove that the Qur'ān is a feminist document. It is not, however; impartial study makes that obvious.

Other feminists hold the Qur'ān to the standards of modern feminism and find it wanting, and therefore reject considerable portions of it. Their rejection inevitably leads to concluding that the Qur'ān is man-made.

My task, and the task of any honest interpreter, is to explain what the Qur'ān itself says, regardless of what modernists or feminists tell us.

[W]hat characterizes science is the greater care in excluding possible alternative explanations, the more detailed elaboration with respect to data on which predictions are based, the greater care in detecting and eliminating sources of error, the more articulate connections to other pieces of knowledge, etc. On this position, what characterizes science is not that the methods employed are unique to science, but that the methods are more carefully employed.

... In this sense, science does not differ in kind from other kinds of inquiry, but it may differ in the degree to which it requires broad and detailed background knowledge and a familiarity with a technical vocabulary that only specialists may possess.<sup>10</sup>

Another unfortunate result of the narrow, anti-religious version of science now commonly supposed to be the only valid one is that an accumulation of knowledge within this shrunken frame, and of the facts, data, and the technologies that spring from them, constitutes progress. The number of patents applied for, the number of university graduates, the number of

<sup>10</sup> *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 'Scientific Method,' section 7, Conclusion.

gadgets one owns, one's income, and so on ... all these quantities, which are measurable, are supposed to stand for a quality, which is immeasurable (i.e., supersensory). Facts of a material nature are converted into a value called 'Progress,' and then either resold to us as a historical fact and an inevitable future or retained as a standard that can be used to shame us into conformity.

Since scientism claims to provide only facts, we tend to assume that its frame is also factual. The following quote illustrates how scientists actually work within what could almost be considered a religious environment, one based on faith in a glorious future:

Supposing ... our scientist is confronted with a datum which he cannot explain; will he say: here is a brute irrational fact? No, indeed. He will say: give me (or my successors) time and the explanation will be found. So does a Christian confronted with human misery still say that God is good and that everything will turn out all right in the long, very long, run. Job said: though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him. So does the scientist say: though the facts slay my expectations yet will I trust in my principles. Both the Christian and the scientist are willing to stand by their conviction, not only beyond but also contrary to the evidence.<sup>11</sup>

As we saw in the previous chapter, mere accretion of data (or technology, or money) does not by itself represent an advance of knowledge (or success, or happiness). Awe-struck by their first few discoveries in the physical sciences and the industrialization that ensued, men of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries formulated a creed of progress that appears to have become too reassuring and self-congratulatory to be ever set aside or replaced. Humanity has become drunk on the psychic high of the myth of progress. Every new invention and each new 'revelation' in the field of science only seems to confirm the initial assumption that human improvement is inevitable as long as we encourage our children to think scientifically (i.e., apply the standards of the physical sciences to all knowledge) and act rationally (i.e., like the self-interested, materialistic creatures modern science says we are). Only religion, characterized as the epitome of

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<sup>11</sup> R. Demos, "Religious Faith and Scientific Faith," in S. Hook, ed., *Religious Experience and Truth* (New York: New York University Press, 1961), p. 130 – quoted in John Edward Sullivan, "The Idea of Religion," *The Great Ideas Today*, 1978 (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1978).

everything science is not, stands in the way.

This dichotomy is a false one, of course, but it is implicit in modern Western discourse in the media and in virtually all of our interactions in schools, government facilities, and other public venues. You can exempt yourself and your family from some of its assumptions if you like, but such exemptions must remain personal and private. The only way to challenge them is through respectable, ‘scientific’ alternatives such as environmentalism or conservation of cultural diversity. To say that GOD Himself condemns this dichotomy is considered anathema and absurd in ‘polite’ or ‘educated’ company.

Today’s believers, therefore, are constantly confronted with an excruciating dilemma: do they reject the use of reason to maintain their faith, or do they abandon their faith to uphold the incessant demands for a particular kind of logic and truth in modern discourse?

## WHEN FRAMES COLLIDE



مَا جَعَلَ اللَّهُ لِرَجُلٍ مِنْ قُلُوبَيْنِ فِي جَوْفِهِ

AL-LĀH has not allotted any man two hearts inside of him. (Q33:4)

One of the most powerful testimonies to the Oneness of GOD, and to the pain awaiting whoever ignores it, is found within the psyche of each one of us. No rational and mature (*‘āqil bāligh*) person can sustain the astonishing discomfort of cognitive dissonance for more than a short time and in matters of minor significance:

In the field of psychology, **cognitive dissonance** occurs when a person holds two or more contradictory beliefs, ideas, or values, or participates in an action that goes against one of these three, and experiences psychological stress because of that. According to this theory, when two actions or ideas are not psychologically consistent with each other, people do all in their power to change them until they become consistent.<sup>12</sup>

Cognitive dissonance affects us primarily where it matters, in our mental life. To ‘make up one’s mind’ is to resolve an issue one way (or another). Even when we participate in an action or involve ourselves in some larger entity, we feel constrained to assimilate the meaning of that act or involvement within our own particular frame of unified meaning. And since we are involved in the whole universe, with all the vastness of significance that entails, our framing might ultimately aim to condense all that our mind surveys into an internally consistent set of meanings. It is this incessant urge to consistency on a cosmic scale that informs humanity’s penchant for religion (or its modern surrogates, such as science). If

<sup>12</sup> From the entry in Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive\\_dissonance](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive_dissonance).

we cannot achieve a ‘theory of everything,’ we need at least one narrative that is comprehensive enough to include ourselves and our chosen absolutes and give us enough reason to go on living, as Viktor Frankl has so convincingly shown in *Man’s Search for Meaning*.

Every one of us must accept a certain irredeemable level of inconsistency in his or her life, and the same may be said of religion, which deals with our contradictions in down-to-earth fashion. Like a government or a parent, religion has to convey a wide variety of messages, from the ineffability of Divine Unity to boundless love for mankind to the strictures and penalties required for discipline in a *dojo*, on a pilgrimage, or during a fast. Overall consistency is paramount, but diversity cannot be denied, which is why the wording in this verse ends with a qualifier – **a great amount**:

أَفَلَا يَتَذَكَّرُونَ الْقُرْآنَ وَلَوْ كَانَ مِنْ عِنْدِ غَيْرِ اللَّهِ لَوَجَدُوا فِيهِ اخْتِلَافًا  
كَثِيرًا

**Have they not considered the Qur’ān? If it had come from anyone but GOD they would have found in it a great amount of incongruity. (Q4:82)**

In other words, the Qur’ān can tie together in one vast and all-inclusive structure the great and the small in our affairs, ranging from the incomprehensible greatness of GOD to the creation of the cosmos to the percentages for each party in an inheritance, but it cannot eliminate the obvious disparities between, for example, faith and idolatry or virtue and vice and how differently we are to regard them, or general laws and particular exceptions, or the contradictions in advice that stem from the variety of human characters and circumstances, or the various inconsistencies of denotation and connotation inherent in all languages. These are the lesser incompatibilities that no system can resolve except by appealing to some principle of natural contrast, such as *yin* and *yang* or the universal symbolisms of day and night, heaven and earth, and the like. A **great amount of incongruity**, on the other hand, is lurking in the shadows of systems that shrink their domains to maintain a narrowly logical consistency or sharpness in their focus, and thereby shut their eyes to realities that do not fit.

Many spiritual ideologies, for example, preach a pacifism they can ‘afford’ because they offload their defence to other less spiritual systems built to deal with ideologies that do not renounce war. An ascetic or scholarly elite – friars, dervishes, monks, and the like – can be held up as the ideal in spiritual heroism because they live off the alms and hard mundane



labour of the supposedly lower classes or the estates that the powerful and wealthy commandeered from the working poor. Scientism can claim to be rigorous in its chosen fields of investigation because it has so little comfort and motivation to offer ordinary people beset by their messy emotional and spiritual needs. The economist will have nothing to say about artistic inspiration, and neither will the poet dare to prescribe fiscal policy for a nation. Each advocates a small part that aims or claims to fill a whole.

كُلُّ حِزْبٍ بِمَا لَدَيْهِمْ فَرِحُونَ

**Every sect is overjoyed with what it has. (Q30:32)**

In this sense, we could say that constricted or incomplete systems allow for **a great amount of incongruity** by simply ignoring what they cannot include.

I observed earlier that GOD is our name for what should be considered the ultimate or greatest frame of all. Faith in GOD should be mankind's highest act of framing and, therefore, be characterized by greater comprehensiveness, resilience, and reach than any lesser framing. It should be comfortable with research into the world that GOD is constantly creating, even as it questions the less scientific preconceptions that often inform such research. And it should not be afraid to confront contrary points of view with arguments and appeals to evidence similar to those found in the Qur'ān itself. As I pointed out in Chapter 21, however, the sad fact of the matter is that no matter what frame is employed, its adherents will shrink it to wrap around themselves like a blanket to pander to their individual fears and interests instead of seeking to enlarge their minds and spirits and explore the new horizons that a truly great frame can open up for them.

The challenges posed by cognitive dissonance can be surmounted by living up to the greater vistas summoned forth by '*AL-LĀHU Akbar*' (GOD is Greater / the Greatest), or, on the other hand, may be side-stepped by the deflections and rationalizations that are commonly utilized to deal with the pain of insurmountable contradiction. This book is an adventure of the first kind; I intend to discover and show how the Qur'ān can overcome the various idols and ideologies arrayed against it in today's world. Not only does it stand up against the modern secular mindset, but it turns back against the believer as well, challenging her to examine her faith and to expand her mind more forcefully and completely than does scientism or any other physicalist belief system. The Qur'ān, in short, champions the self-transcendence of all of us in ways that no product of the human mind can equal.

But to keep in mind the supremacy of GOD as the Ultimate Framer requires a supreme act of faith, one that is not so easily summoned or

maintained for very long in the midst of our daily affairs. More often than not, we lose our connection to the Absolute All and begin to see our frame of faith in GOD as just one among many contending frames, some of them hostile and most of them indifferent to 'our' frame. When this loss of vision occurs, and we find ourselves caught and confused within the coils of an unbelieving culture, the resulting contradictions and questions become unmanageable, embarrassing, and painful. We dodge, we divert, and we try to disengage, but the conflict cannot be denied, and the tension of trying – trying to deny the tension, or trying to affirm one's faith despite the tension – leads to the irresolution and stress of cognitive dissonance.

If GOD loves truth and justice, why am I surrounded by falsehood and corruption? If GOD hears our prayers, then why are mine still unanswered? Why do I feel so uncomfortable talking about GOD, when we so gleefully invent Santa Claus parades and Halloween parties for our children? Why are GOD's laws so easily ignored, while the laws of secular society are so strictly enforced and religiously obeyed? A thousand other unspoken questions emphasize the same point – is my faith really relevant? Is GOD really Great, or am I just engaged in a great charade of make-believe?

In such situations, when a faith that claims to be paramount does not feel as though it really is, believers suffer in frustration and despair, and in some cases abandon their faith partially or totally, consciously or unconsciously, because of their inability or unwillingness to cope. Then religion is no longer the answer to cognitive dissonance, but its cause.

The case of an authentic, living, and practice-oriented faith in GOD, when marooned in modern Western society, is a particular form of cognitive dissonance.

The genuine shyness of the modern Thai maiden, of peasants uprooted from their farms, or of an old man in the presence of an aggressive young female reporter is a phenomenon that deserves at least a name to make it clear that it is not totally alone. Let us call it, for lack of a better term, an example of **cultural incoherence**. This occurs whenever a previously significant part of one culture finds itself stranded by time and circumstance in another cultural environment unfriendly to it. This sad remnant, adhered to by some as the old and proper way of behaving, living, or thinking, suddenly appears weak, meaningless, or retrogressive in the light of a new set of contrary values. Like monks who must abstain from contact with females for fear of sexual intimacy or the women of the Middle East

who willingly don their *chadors*, a truly shy Thai feels herself to be an anachronism, and is exposed to all the innuendo, liberal scorn, and merciless pity that the modern media can cast at whatever dares to differ from the creed of progress.<sup>13</sup>

The stress of cultural incoherence, however, is merely a horizontal tension between two relatively equal systems that collide either in space, such as the modern Western encroachment on Eastern or aboriginal cultures, or in time, as new standards and values replace older mores. Yet this strain is as nothing compared to the vertical tension that arises as the believer awakens to a Reality that appears new to him, but is in fact primordial. He begins to see that the absolutes I have been constantly mentioning since Chapter 1 are actually envoys of a Personal-Suprapersonal Reality, spiritual beings that pervade the so-called reality of our day-to-day life. He feels stranded and misunderstood in this mundane, physicalist, anti-spiritual society, like an angel among animals, tongue-tied as he tries to convey to them the wonders of the world above, and, as his faith falters and fades, ever less able to communicate that sense of amazement even to his own true self.

When his spirit wavers, almost all the choices the believer faces are bleak. They include:

- 1) surrendering to the secular physicalist framework and abandoning his faith altogether.
- 2) accepting the broad outlines of that framework but keeping an eye out for the odd crevices in the system where faith as a cultural option can be allowed to grow like weeds in poorly tended parking lots.
- 3) maintaining an uneasy balance between modern rationalism and commitment to his religion, producing a divided intellect and a vacillating heart.
- 4) defending his commitment to religion by suppressing the Qur'ānic spirit of inquiry and rational argument. The withering of the mind is then taken to be a proof of strong faith.

There are, however, two other choices, which work best if combined as one holistic response to the challenge of cognitive dissonance and the clash of incompatible frames. The one I have pursued thus far in this book is to take up the contents of the Qur'ān as a great intellectual resource. GOD has bestowed on us an immense flock of exuberant and virile ideas,

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<sup>13</sup> Mont Redmond, *Wondering into Thai Culture*, p. 251.

deliberately left unsystematized so that in each era we must construct anew the corrals for them that will best serve our purposes.

Add to that the second way, which is to engage the Qur'ān not primarily as a book of ideas but as a **pearly star (Q24:35)**, the pole-star of the soul. Indeed, such is how AL-LĀH describes it from the outset: **That is the Book in which there is no doubt, a guide for those who are aware (Q2:2)**. All forms of awareness, including hopes, fears, attachments, and emotions, must be as fully involved in this struggle as our intellectual life. Ideas alone do not provide the stamina and conviction needed to withstand the test of spiritual incoherence in today's disheartened world. Only when strengthened by good habits and practices and planted in the soil of humility can the ideas inspired by the Qur'ān live and grow in our hearts until they attract GOD's Love and reignite His Light in us.



*Photography:*  
Shama Siddiquie

## 30.

### THIRD SYNOPSIS



55. Every conceptual system works within a frame whose limits are often invisible to its proponents.
56. My name for the Ultimate, Unlimited Frame is GOD, Who is also The Ultimate Framer.
57. Faith in GOD as The Ultimate often becomes degraded to serve the interests of particular groups.
58. Reductionism of this sort occurs whenever believers seek to reify the limitlessness of their faith.
59. Believers in atheism aim to 'frame' God within a straitened version of what they call rationality.
60. Religious believers who try to be 'scientific' also end up exchanging The Infinite for finite objects.
61. The Infinite is implicit in the physicalist cosmos by way of meaning, data, and randomness.
62. The atheist demand that God be physically visible or provable is a theological category error.
63. Believers may ask to see GOD, but only to increase their faith, not to challenge His existence.
64. GOD's 'appearance' to us is usually in proportion to our capacity to accept Him.
65. As with knowledge comes more responsibility, ignorance of God is the 'least bad' fate for many.
66. Spatiotemporal distance, city life, secular society, self-image, and our character blind us to GOD.
67. By looking 'out' for GOD as a separate entity, we miss His Immanence and Personality.
68. The Qur'ān's 'GOD-talk' is meant to dispel this blindness by challenging our egocentric habits.
69. GOD-as-Subject is Alone and Unknowable. He names Himself that He might be known.

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70. GOD-as-Object is Transparent, partially knowable, and reflected in the mirror-world of things.
  71. Through His Spirit, He also reveals Himself to us by our own self-awareness as subjects.
  72. Monist mystics have misinterpreted the intensity of this self-awareness as union with God.
  73. A firm intellectual structure can avert such mistakes and help deal with the dualities of daily life.
  74. All of us depend on conceptual frameworks, and no amount of facts can dispense with them.
  75. Living “in and with the supersensible” still occurs despite the modern decline of religious faith.
  76. Nature and scripture both consist of signs from GOD, and hence do not invalidate each other.
  77. Science and religious faith utilize different, complementary frameworks in their pursuit of truth.
  78. Both bodies of knowledge employ hypotheses and testing, but with different levels of precision.
  79. The modern dominance of physicalist rationality causes major cognitive dissonance for believers.
  80. When our faith in GOD’s Transcendence loses focus, it can begin to feel culturally irrelevant.
  81. More than just ideas, therefore, we need the Qur’ān’s emotional, moral, and spiritual guidance.

## THE OTHER SIDE

*In a land, long ago, where the golden blossoms blow  
By the hand of a breeze clear and sharp from the seas,  
High embanked flows a stream, fresh and fairer than a dream,  
Over green and rolling ground; in the air, not a sound  
Of a cricket, bell, or bird; from the lips, not a word;  
And the sun-dappled cedars are silently stirred.*

*There below an aged pine is a cottage, and it's mine.  
Soft and slow, sweet and low, as the grass, O breezes, grow,  
Coolly clothing us with care — my beloved ones are there.  
Life has left my time-burnt face hopeless of a lightning grace.  
But a gleam on the wing in the air of the spring  
Tugs tomorrow-bound longings like a kite on a string.*

*Thus was I when there came like a thought without name,  
Like the sigh of the dead, a forewarning, and it read:  
“On the stream’s farther side, cross the river-way wide,  
Are barbarian hordes, and they live by their swords.  
Have you lived? Soon you must face their violence and lust  
And for envy they’ll ravish your darlings to dust.*

*“Though you blessed them in God’s name, they would kill you all the same.  
Be the best that man has been; innocence itself is sin.  
Fortitude provokes their wrath: weep or smile — they just laugh.  
While you pray to God above, they defile those you love,  
And they fling — as the fears of the mother dam her tears —  
The small infant to fall on their up-pointed spears.”*

*My soul shook like the grass when the winter spirits pass,  
As I took in at a glance crowds of life, full of dance  
To a deep, inner tune, brief as breath, bright as noon;  
Then I saw the open gates, where handsome Death smiles and waits,  
What the purpose is they serve, drawing up to every nerve,  
Every Doom-delaying moment of elation and verve.*

*In this land, since now I know how the golden blossoms grow,  
Why the hand of the breeze and its painful sharpness please,  
All my sense-seconds seem fresh and fairer than a dream.  
Over old familiar ground, from here and there, comes the sound  
Of God’s ever-joyous Word to the heart where it’s heard;  
And the sun-dappled cedars are silently stirred.*



# 31.

## WHEN ALL ELSE IS LOST



Before you ever thought of choosing God, GOD chose you. You had no say in the matter. You did not get to choose ‘you.’ But for the grace of GOD, ‘you’ might be someone else.

(1) You could have been a poor landless Ma’anyan farm worker in South-eastern Kalimantan in the year 125. After a drought ruined the fields, you were forced to sell yourself, along with your wife and children, into slavery to redeem your debts. You never saw them again; they became the possessions of other men. A year later, you and hundreds of others, some with their families, were transported across the Indian Ocean to cut trees and clear fields in what was then virgin land – the southeast coast of Madagascar. An accident in the forest left you lame and injured, a useless burden. Starving, infected, abandoned, and forgotten, you have no one to hold your hand in these last few hours on this planet.

Would it cheer you up to know that the modern world condemns slavery in all its forms?

(2) You could have been the last Jewish merchant in the Chinese town of Yinchuan in 1691. Trade has declined, and there are constant clashes between a distant government and the headstrong local tribes. Still, somehow, you have managed to hold onto the ways of your ancestors – ways that have dwindled to nearly nothing in the land. Your wife died long ago, and your daughters are married off to cousins in Kaifeng. Yesterday, though, a band of ruffians entered the town, looting and burning, including the shop you spent your whole life building up to pass on to your only son. And they took your son with them. Today you begged them to let him go. But your son himself turned to you and said, “I am glad to go – to be rid of your stupid religion and stinking shop. I told them to burn it.”

Luckily, federal laws now support protection of traditional cultures and their customs.

(3) You could have been the eight-year-old daughter of a nomadic herder in northern Tibet in 1800, when a healer visited your tent and made a great impression. You resolved to be a potent sorceress like her, and began to have amazing dreams. Your mother tried to discourage you, but you were convinced that the spirits wanted you to be their medium. While still in your teens, you picked up bits of esoteric knowledge and trafficked in spells and potions. But then your powers faded, and you were desperate to call them back. You went to lamas and hermits, and traded sex for the things that were easiest to learn, their tricks and ruses. Finally, your deceit was discovered by an old witch; she denounced you as a fraud. Now you survive on the margin of society, in ignominy and filth.

In today's terms, however, you could be celebrated as a brave and independent woman.

(4) You could have been a handsome young Khamti man in the Namsai district of Arunachal Pradesh in 1856. You were married thirteen days ago to a beautiful girl from a nearby village, and you couldn't have been happier. Monks arrived to bless your wedding, and guests came from all over the district with gifts and good wishes. If only your mother had joined in the merriment! But now you realize why she looked so tense and apprehensive. You could not consummate your marriage! Your wife has returned to her parents, bitter and scornful of your lack of manhood. And now your mother tells you through her tears: "When you were still little, I boasted of your beauty to another woman – a sorceress, as I was later told. Perhaps she cast an evil eye on you, and this is her indelible curse."

For the rest of your life, though, you need not worry about perpetuating patriarchal inequality.

(5) You could have been an elderly Evenk woman in eastern Yakutia in 1917. Your life in the taiga, herding reindeer and raising a family, has been hard. Recently, though, you have had time to teach your grandchildren the skills your parents taught you. On this warm summer day, you took your ten-year-old grandson to a nearby stream to spear fish. Sitting and watching on a rock, you fell asleep. Suddenly you woke to your grandson's screams. A massive bear was standing over him, tearing at his flesh. Without pausing to think, you shouted and grabbed your rifle. But you misjudged. The bear recognized the danger you pose, and is heading straight for you. You shot once, but missed. There will be no second bullet. You too are facing your final moments on this planet.

At least you can die happy, knowing that you led an ecologically ethical lifestyle.

(6) You could have been a twenty-six-year-old Canadian member of an aerial survey team for the 1950 expansion of the Thule Air Base in western Greenland. A sudden storm, followed by engine failure, forced you and your co-pilot to land on an ice field ... and plunge into a crevice invisible in the blizzard. Your instruments are smashed, your radio is dead, and something has impaled your co-pilot to his seat while he thrashes about, wailing and cursing in agony. You are also losing blood, but there is no pain. In the semi-darkness you can only see that you are facing down into a black gap with steep sides and no way up. You never thought it would end like this, and so soon. You need some peace, to think, maybe to pray, but nothing comes but tears. If only your partner would shut up and die!

Your sacrifice for the military supremacy of Western capitalism will not have been in vain.

(7) You could have been born a blind, disabled girl with cerebral palsy in the Caura River basin in east-central Venezuela in 1971. Your poor Pemon mother was wont to get her drinking water and buy fish from the river, downstream from a gold mine that freely dumped its mercury. You've relied on her for everything; she is your only connection to the world that makes sense. But when you turned seventeen, she had no choice; your body, however deformed, is still a female body, and the young miners in the area have little choice as well. Then you are violated so often in so many ways that your life has no meaning for you. Everything in your existence is cause for shame and anguish. So when your mother finally leaves you on the side of the road, what pain have you been spared?

Never forget that you are a beautiful human being whose rights are worth protecting.

(8) You could have been a fourteen-year-old girl in a small South Dakota town in 1980. You live in a warm, stable, churchgoing community and have kind, caring parents. But you are pregnant, your boyfriend doesn't know you any more, and you want to die. On the one hand, you could admit it all to your parents, have the baby, and ... bear the shame and burden of a thoughtless moment for the rest of your life. On the other hand, you could have a secret abortion, and ... bear the guilt of having murdered an innocent human being for the rest of your life. Either way, your precious chance at happiness is ruined, permanently. There's a bridge across the river where this pain of failure can end. There's no other way.

Never having to face, as a woman, hard choices like these – that's progress worth dying for.

(9) You could have been a fisherman standing, weeping, on the southeast coast of Madagascar. Just an hour ago, you were in your tiny hovel, resting after a brutal workday offshore. You saw your seven-year-old son playing with a cheap plastic make-believe cellphone, and your wife said, “So, Mr. Professional, what are you going to do with that phone?” With the heart-breaking naivete of childhood, he replied, “I’m going to be a scientist!” That’s when you got up and walked out to the beach. You said those very words to your father when he asked you what your dream was, twenty years ago. And now here you are, looking out over the water your ancestors crossed 1,881 years before, and no further ahead. The chances for your grandson twenty years from now are equally bleak in this, one of the poorest countries on Earth. And despair floods your heart at the unfairness and futility of it all.

Everything happens for a reason, and through science humanity can discover those reasons.



In these nine scenarios – fictional situations that could well be only a few details away from real persons and events – there is either no emotional space or no time for propositions, reasoned arguments, or any of the remote and trite platitudes I have added as afterthoughts from the modern world. Your heart has been concentrated to a single point – enough for one prayer, one consolation, or one hope.

In this moment of existential extremity, be it imminent death or gradual degradation, you face the undeniable impact of the Transcendent. The world has failed you, and your ordinary self is naughted. There is nothing left to you ... nothing but GOD.

أَمَّنْ يُجِيبُ الْمُضْطَرَّ إِذَا دَعَاهُ

**Or who responds to one distressed when he calls unto him? (Q27:62)**

This is a matter beyond religion, or rather all religion is derived from a non-denominational moment like this. You probably have a religious name for it, but words alone do not convey its force. When this reality appears, it may very well engender a word on the lips, whether as a cry or a groan. But as Reality, this is far greater than any human expression, greater even than time and space, and more precious than the entire universe. It is at this instant that a door opens for you to realize what Divinity means.



When you are presented with such grim, desperate, or hopeless situations, your first instinct is to look for a way out. You could, conceivably, ‘start life over again’ as the merchant in (2), or become a celibate monk in (4), or get counselling in (8). People who have spent their lives looking out for themselves will keep looking, almost reflexively. That can be the best and healthiest reaction to a crisis when hope is an option, but not all crises appear to offer that option. In (1), (5), and (6), for example, imminent death looks unavoidable.

This suggests a second means of coping with the cognitive dissonance posed by the sudden unravelling of your life. You could, if you believe in heaven or *karma*, console yourself with the thought of rewards in the Ever-after proportionate to your suffering in this life, as in (1), (7), and (9). You could think, in the last few seconds of your existence, of what you have left as a legacy – your descendants, in the case of (5), or your achievements, in the case of (6). You might even, as with (2), content yourself with knowing that God, The Just, will settle accounts on the Day of Judgment with those who wronged, oppressed, deceived, or despised you.

All these solutions, however, have one inescapable flaw. They put you at the centre of attention, and seek – quite as a matter of course – to rescue, reassure, or compensate you. Whether by postponing the inevitable reckoning or rummaging through one’s spiritual cabinet for a few scraps of solace, they do not address the main issue highlighted by these scenarios:

إِنَّ الْإِنْسَانَ لَفِي خُسْرٍ

**Verily humanity is at a loss. (Q103:2)**

GOD, I believe, is relevant to all these scenarios, but not just as a last straw to be grasped. I have deliberately crafted situations in which responses such as “Luckily, ...”, “At least ...” ring hollow, even if we were to try to dress them up with references to God, such as “Luckily, God ...” or “At least God ...” or “Your sacrifice for God ...”. In other words, the suffering implicit in these scenarios is so overwhelming that conventional thoughts of God will probably not ‘make it go away’. In these circumstances, the death or degradation or defeat is too immediate to allow for thoughts of Divine compensation in a distant future or even recollection of His favours in the past.

At such an extreme point like this, a person can lose his faith. As a

member of the ‘What’s in it for me?’ crowd, he suddenly realizes that God was not ‘there for him.’ I am reminded of a conversation between a pastor and an innocent man on death row, only minutes before his execution, in John Grisham’s *The Confession*:

“My point is you’re about to die, and you know when it will happen. Very few people know this. Soldiers in battle may feel like dead men, but there’s always a chance they’ll survive. I suppose some victims of horrible crimes know they’re at the end, but they have such short notice. You, though, have had this date for months. Now the hour is at hand, and it’s not a bad time to make amends with God.”

“... But you’re missing something here, Keith ... Me, I am innocent.”

“True, but death is death, and in the end nothing else matters except your relationship with God.”

“So you’re trying to convince me that I should go running back to God here at the last minute, and just sort of forget the past nine years.”

“You blame God for the past nine years?”

“Yes, I do. This is what happened to me, Keith. I was eighteen years old, a longtime Christian, still active in church ... Then, for some reason I guess I’ll never understand, a bolt of lightning hits me square in the head. I’m wearing handcuffs. I’m in jail. My picture is on the front page. I’m declared guilty long before the trial. My fate is determined by twelve white people, half of them good, solid Baptists. The prosecutor was a Methodist, the judge was Presbyterian ... I remember sitting in the courtroom, looking at their faces as they condemned me to death – hard, unforgiving, Christian faces – and thinking to myself, ‘We don’t worship the same God.’ And we don’t. How can God allow His people to kill so often? Answer that, please.”

“God’s people are often wrong, Donté, but God is never wrong. You can’t blame Him.”

“... I was a faithful servant, Keith, and look what I get.”

... Keith’s time was up. “Would you pray with me, Donté?”

“Why? I prayed the first three years I was in prison, and things just got worse. I could’ve prayed ten times a day, and I would still be sitting right here, talking to you.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> John Grisham, *The Confession*, pp. 317–319 passim.

Compare this with a similar example of an unjust sentence of death (Q7:123-126):

قَالَ فِرْعَوْنُ أَمَنْتُمْ بِهِ قَبْلَ أَنْ آذَنَ لَكُمْ إِنَّ هَذَا لَمَكْرٌ مَكْرْتُمُوهُ فِي  
الْمَدِينَةِ لِتُخْرِجُوا مِنْهَا أَهْلَهَا فَسَوْفَ تَعْلَمُونَ  
لَأَقْطَعَنَّ أَيْدِيَكُمْ وَأَرْجُلَكُمْ مِنْ خِلَافٍ ثُمَّ لَأُصَلِّبَنَّكُمْ أَجْمَعِينَ  
قَالُوا إِنَّا إِلَى رَبِّنَا مُنْقَلِبُونَ  
وَمَا نَنفِقُ مِنْهَا إِلَّا أَنْ أَمَّا بِآيَاتِ رَبِّنَا لَمَّا جَاءَتْنَا رَبَّنَا أَفْرِغْ عَلَيْنَا  
صَبْرًا وَتَوَقَّنَا مُسْلِمِينَ

Fir'aun said, "You believed in him before I gave you my permission. This is verily a plot that you contrived within the town to drive out its inhabitants. But you shall come to know. / I shall cut off your hands and feet on alternating sides, and then shall crucify you all." / They replied, "Indeed unto our Lord we are returning. / You do not wreak vengeance on us other than for our believing in our Master's signs when they appeared to us. O Lord, pour out upon us fortitude, and take us back as ones who have submitted."

In each case, the expected answer is known – God. But in the first example, on death row, the answer is rejected. What makes it so satisfying and triumphant in the latter instance?

The presence of death, or disgrace, or disaster, is like a *koan*, an existential puzzle or dilemma. The student who receives the *koan* already knows, theoretically at least, what the answer should be – *satori*, or instant enlightenment. The believer, likewise, 'knows' that God is the answer. But the student and the believer may conclude that the dilemma is meaningless – a conclusion that lasts for as long as they do not rephrase the question implicit in it.

When confronted with an existential crisis such as imminent death, the 'novice,' whether a student or a believer, is trapped within the frame of 'What's in it for me?' The answer, 'Nothing,' is of course the exact opposite of 'God.' The question of the novice presupposes a false duality, namely that between him and God – a zero-sum situation of 'He wins, I lose.' This is the mentality underlying the conversation between the pastor and the prisoner in *The Confession*.

But the mentality of the magicians sentenced to death by Fir'aun is totally different. Their attitude is summed up in (Q23:1):

قَدْ أَفْلَحَ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ

The faithful have already gained success.<sup>LL</sup>

LL

This success is not a free pass won by belonging to any particular sect or church. A believer does not know whether he is a believer. Nor does this success guarantee freedom from Divine retribution. Rather it is the success of heading in the right direction, given one's character, circumstances, and sins.

In other words, they are winners no matter what happens. The spell of duality under which they lived before is broken. They identify entirely with GOD, and with His decrees, so death, disease, and destruction are as 'good' for them as their opposites.

The *koan* is solved, not by any new information, but by adjusting the frame that defines its parameters, or the presuppositions that informed it. And just as *satori* can be instantaneous, so is real faith. A lifetime of scholarly learning or intellectual analysis is no substitute for it. It only

takes a moment. And often it is only in an extreme moment, like death, or like **the Hour** constantly referred to in the Qur'an, that this crystallization of insight can occur.

فَهَلْ يَنْظُرُونَ إِلَّا السَّاعَةَ أَنْ تَأْتِيَهُمْ بَغْتَةً فَقَدْ جَاءَ أَشْرَاطُهَا فَأَنَّى لَهُمْ إِذَا جَاءَتْهُمْ ذِكْرَاهُمْ  
فَاعْلَمْ أَنَّهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ

So do they wait for anything but that the Hour will suddenly beset them? Its portents have already come. How, then, will it be for them when their remembrance comes to them? / So know that there is no god but AL-LĀH. (Q47:18–19)

A *koan* is a staged exercise, supervised by a master, and meant to reveal the limits of dualistic thinking. By serious, unremitting attention, the student aims to make the dilemma assigned to him existential and decisive.

But a dilemma from GOD is more than that. At least one, of course (and usually many more), is assigned to every human being, whether the recipient is ready for it or not. A term for it in Arabic is *fitnah*, or trial – a trial of faith. No two trials are exactly the same, as the circumstances and character of each person make their trials virtually incomparable. A death sentence for me at my age, given what I know, will have a very different impact than on you, given your experiences and family ties. And every



trial almost always signifies much more than, say, the limits of rationality or dualism.

The aforementioned prospect of hideous torture and certain death is one such trial mentioned in the Qur'ān. But there are many other types.

It can be an unexpected encounter with the truth:

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْعِلْمَ مِنْ قَبْلِهِ إِذَا يُتْلَى عَلَيْهِمْ يَخِرُّونَ لِلْأَذْقَانِ سُجَّدًا  
وَيَقُولُونَ سُبْحَانَ رَبِّنَا إِنْ كَانَ وَعْدُ رَبِّنَا لَمَفْعُولًا

Truly those who formerly were given knowledge, when it [the Qur'ān] was recited to them, fell upon their faces in prostration, / Saying, “Exaltedly Transcendent is our Lord; the promise of our Lord has surely been fulfilled.” (Q17:107–108)

It can be a mission failure. The mission was a test of patience, and failure was another test:

وَذَا النُّونِ إِذْ ذَهَبَ مُغَاضِبًا فَظَنَّ أَنْ لَنْ نَقْدِرَ عَلَيْهِ فَنَادَى فِي الظُّلُمَاتِ أَنْ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا أَنْتَ سُبْحَانَكَ إِنِّي كُنْتُ مِنَ الظَّالِمِينَ  
فَاسْتَجَبْنَا لَهُ وَجَعَلْنَاهُ مِنَ الْعَمَمِ وَكَذَلِكَ نُنْجِي الْمُؤْمِنِينَ

And [remember] Dhān-Nūn [Yūnus], when he left angrily, and thought that We had no decree for him. Then in the darkness [in the belly of a whale] he cried out, “There is no god but You; Exaltedly Beyond are You! Indeed, I have been one of the unjust.” / Then We responded and We saved him from distress. In that way do We save the faithful. (Q21:87–88)

It can be intolerable social and psychological pressure:

إِذَا ضَاقَتْ عَلَيْهِمُ الْأَرْضُ بِمَا رَحُبَتْ وَضَاقَتْ عَلَيْهِمْ أَنْفُسُهُمْ وَظَنُّوا  
أَنْ لَا مَلْجَأَ مِنَ اللَّهِ إِلَّا إِلَيْهِ ثُمَّ تَابَ عَلَيْهِمْ لِيَتُوبُوا

When the earth closed in on them, despite its vastness, and their souls closed in on them, and they perceived that there was no escape from GOD except to Him – then He relented to them that they might repent. (Q9:118)

And it can simply be a total loss of wealth and the ruin of one's hopes:

وَأَحِيطَ بِثَمَرِهِ فَأَصْبَحَ يُقَلِّبُ كَفَّيْهِ عَلَى مَا أَنْفَقَ فِيهَا وَهِيَ خَاوِيَةٌ عَلَى  
عُرُوشِهَا وَيَقُولُ يَا لَيْتَنِي لَمْ أُشْرِكْ بِرَبِّي أَحَدًا  
وَلَمْ تَكُنْ لَهُ فَنَةٌ يَنْصُرُونَهُ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ وَمَا كَانَ مُنتَصِرًا  
هَٰذَاكَ الْوَلَايَةُ لِلَّهِ الْحَقِّ هُوَ خَيْرٌ ثَوَابًا وَخَيْرٌ عُقْبًا

The yield [of his gardens] was destroyed, and he began to wring his hands for having spent so much on it and now it lay in ruins, saying “Ah, if only I had not made anything a partner with my Lord!” / He had no force to help him other than AL-LĀH, nor was he winning. / There the right of rulership belongs to GOD The Truth. He is The Best in recompense, The Best in outcome. (Q18:42–44)

There are many more of these existential tests and instants of transcendental awareness in the Qur’ān – storms at sea, drownings, battles, miracles, and encounters with the unexplained, to name but a few. One could say that almost all of its stories and brief narrations have such moments as their core and ultimate purpose. Better still, one could say that the Qur’ān itself is another one such storm, battle, or rendezvous with the uncanny. The reading of it becomes a trial in its own right – a test of the reader, a ‘proof’ of who he is:

وَأَمَّا الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا فَيَقُولُونَ مَاذَا أَرَادَ اللَّهُ بِهَٰذَا مَثَلًا يُضِلُّ بِهِ كَثِيرًا  
وَيَهْدِي بِهِ كَثِيرًا وَمَا يُضِلُّ بِهِ إِلَّا الْفَاسِقِينَ

As for those who have rejected [truth], they say, “What did AL-LĀH intend by this as an example? Many He misleads by it, and many does He guide by it, and none does He mislead but those who are astray.” (Q2:26)

الَّذِينَ آتَيْنَاهُمُ الْكِتَابَ يَتْلُونَهُ حَقَّ تِلَاوَتِهِ أُولَٰئِكَ يُؤْمِنُونَ بِهِ وَمَنْ يَكْفُرْ  
بِهِ فَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الْخَاسِرُونَ

Those on whom We have bestowed the Book, reading it the way it should be read, are those who put their faith in it. And as for those who spurn it, they are those who lose. (Q2:121)

The denier is the one who refuses to be tested, who is incredulous that her life boils down to just this. The believer, on the other hand, is one who has been preparing her whole life for this, or, even if not prepared, instantaneously recognizes what this moment means, and embraces it for good.

Let us return to those scenarios I imagined, and give them the endings they deserve.



(1) ... Starving, infected, abandoned, and forgotten, you have no one to hold your hand in these last few hours on this planet.

You reach for the earthen cup in which you left a mouthful of water to slake your burning thirst. As you reach, you remember how hard you fought to claim this cup from another slave, a countryman of yours. To whom did it rightfully belong? It doesn't matter any more. Just as you start to sip, you see a centipede, swimming, struggling, drowning ... in this little bit of water at the bottom of the cup.

Instantly it strikes you. How absurd this all has been! At this crucial moment in your life, you are finally out of the cup, no longer struggling like this centipede to survive; you are free ... free at last! Equal to your masters – no, far beyond them, for they, as you have often seen, are still struggling for the measly drops of pleasure in those miniature worlds of theirs. With one great and final laugh, you toss the cup as far as you can out of your hut and die, released from bondage, jubilant.

(2) ... But your son himself turned to you and said, “I am glad to go – to be rid of your stupid religion and stinking shop. I told them to burn it.”

Stunned and speechless, you slowly turn to go ... back to the empty shell of your town. As you turn, however, you see a face you recognize in the crowd of ex-slaves, freebooters, and hangers-on who always follow temporary success. This man ... you've seen him, frequently, many years ago. Then it comes to you. He was a client of yours, a petty merchant, who borrowed from you and was never quite able to repay. You dunned him and pursued him until he abandoned his business and disappeared. You barely regained your principal, but the interest was lost.

You lost interest ... but your client probably never lost interest in what had been his livelihood, his family, his former standing in the community, and in you, his nemesis. Now you and he are equally homeless and degraded by another interested party – God.

“God is Just!” you exclaim. What you took has been taken. What He gives He reclaims – in equal measure, and without profit, for nothing can be said to make God, the Owner of all, richer than He already is. “Justice

has been done,” you murmur to yourself. And suddenly the peace of ultimate understanding floods your heart as you walk away. A life of acceptance and contentment has begun.

(3) ... Finally, your deceit was discovered by an old witch; she denounced you as a fraud. Now you survive on the margin of society, in ignominy and filth.

When your morale is at its lowest ebb, and you are sitting at the door of your hovel, far from the homes of others, a dog comes limping to you and whimpering, with an infected paw. Given your knowledge of herbs and plasters, you are able to treat it, and so gain a companion in misery. Little by little, you see other small examples of suffering you never noticed before, so busy were you with ‘getting ahead in the world.’

Mice and sparrows, foxes and hawks, goats and yaks gradually teach you a whole new set of values, grounded in compassion, patience, and humility. Decades pass in service to these humble creatures, and their mute gratitude becomes palpable enough for you to realize that you were never as happy as you are now, on the outskirts of society and respectability. And then, finally, in your last days on earth, even the villagers and their children regard you as a saint, for your heart has grown to embrace them all while seeking nothing for yourself. And you die with a wisdom and serenity you never imagined possible for a soul as sinful as yours was.

(4) ... Your wife has returned to her parents, bitter and scornful of your lack of manhood. And now your mother tells you through her tears: “When you were still little, I boasted of your beauty to another woman – a sorceress, as I was later told. Perhaps she cast an evil eye on you, and this is her indelible curse.”

The next morning, while packing your bag and a roll of bedding, you announce to your family that you are leaving on a pilgrimage. Where? Who knows? Who cares? And off you go.

The first week is bewildering, the first month is exhilarating, and the first year is exhausting. But by the time you reach Bodh Gaya in India you are a veteran traveller. Young and strong (except for that embarrassing secret that ensures your chastity), you peregrinate from one temple to the next, through the breadth and length of India, followed by Sri Lanka, Burma, and Thailand.

Forty years drift away like a dream. By now, the memories you have of your parents, your village, and that life-altering curse are nothing but a wisp of mist in the morning of a distant land. You have rubbed up enough

against this world to know how threadbare and flimsy it really is, and the great Beyond beckons you with all its beauty, power, and fathomless compassion. Somewhere along the way south, on the Malay Peninsula, with the dust of the road in your eyes and stiffness in your joints, you pass on peacefully, like the echo of a whisper amid the mountains of the Eternal Mind.

(5) ... The bear recognized the danger you pose, and is heading straight for you. You shot once, but missed. There will be no second bullet. You too are facing your final moments on this planet.

Despite your terror, you see the muscular magnificence of this beast. You have dined on the flesh of his relatives, even as he has just tasted the flesh of yours. You and he are equals; he has his terrible beauty, and you have yours. The Terrible Beauty of the Spirit in all things floods through you, and you cry out in the greatness of your terror and the beauty of the Spirit that gave Itself so freely to you both.

With your arms raised and your head held high, you release a cry such as you have never heard before and will never hear again – a Universal Shout that is neither Yes nor No, but utterly Unfathomable.

When you regain your senses, you find yourself standing, alive, and the bear has disappeared. Frantically you rush to find your nephew still breathing, and also barely alive. Stumbling and sobbing with terror and the incantations of your ancestors, you carry him through the woods to the herbs and healing hands of hope and home.

(6) ... You need some peace, to think, maybe to pray, but nothing comes but tears. If only your partner would shut up and die!

Then it occurs to you that, while both of you are losing blood and will soon be unconscious, your partner is dying in excruciating pain, while you are in relative comfort, and yet would murder him to keep that comfort to the end. How selfish you have been!

So you begin to talk, to soothe him, despite his screams and obscenities, and your own fears. You remind him of how you both dedicated yourselves to courage and stoicism when you joined the service. You recount the many adventures you have had together, and how many times before this you improbably escaped death. In the end, no one escapes death. But many do avoid an ignoble death.

Then you describe what noble death is like – the calmness, the clarity, and the peace in it. You mention Socrates, Cato the Younger, and other heroes of renown. From there, you go on to recapitulate the beliefs that

you and he share – in the immortal soul, in eternal reward for having done what is eternally good, and the Eternal Good Who is God. Ultimately, nothing matters besides Him.

As you speak, your partner cannot help but listen, and his cries give way to whimpers, and finally he lapses into silence, breathes fitfully for a few minutes, and dies. And before your spirit ebbs away into that same darkness, you think one final thought – that you could not have chosen a better way to leave this world than to hear yourself utter the most beautiful words you have ever heard.

(7) ... Then you are violated so often in so many ways that your life has no meaning for you. Everything in your existence is cause for shame and anguish. So when your mother finally leaves you on the side of the road, what pain have you been spared?

You think to yourself, “Now I have no one, not even my mother. I am truly worthless.” A black pit opens up under your soul, and you yearn to fall and vanish into its finality.

But then you hear, as clearly as a human voice beside your ear: “No, not so. I am your Lord; I loved you even before I made you ... and I made you for this. I gave you all you need to love Me; the rest is useless. Everything I have given those around you has made them love Me less ... so what they have is less than what you have. You have the gift of wanting nothing more from this world – the greatest of all My worldly gifts. Be glad, then that you love Me as I love you, with a Love that consumes every sorrow, sickness, and sin. For they are nothing beside Me. And if I am all you have, you have it all.”

The light in your heart after hearing that voice soon becomes manifest, evoking first respect and then veneration by those who come to know you, and you eventually leave this world content, purified, beloved, forgiving, and forgiven.

(8) ... Either way, your precious chance at happiness is ruined, permanently. There’s a bridge across the river where this pain of failure can end. There’s no other way.

The night before it all ends, your mother comes into the room and sits beside you as you lie in bed rigid, tragically determined, and sobbing inside. She asks you what is wrong with you, and you refuse to answer. “I won’t leave you here until you tell me,” she says.

After half an hour of resistance, you succumb to her pleas (secretly glad to), and tell her everything. “I could see this coming, but I was praying

it wouldn't," she says. "What you did was wrong, but you know that more deeply now than any words of mine could tell you. And you are not alone. We too are at fault.

"Your father and I saw you hanging out with a bad group of friends, and we simply hoped you would grow out of it. So we were wrong too. But our God is gentle and forgiving, and He always finds a way for those who trust in Him.

"Here's the plan. We'll move away from here – far away – and you can have your baby where no one knows you, and then we'll see how you feel, and what our new community is like. I just want you to know that we will always truly love you, try to find what is best for you, and help you even when you do something foolish. That's what parents are for, darling; never forget that."

You never forgot, and forty years later, your daughter is your best friend and a constant source of solace. You cannot imagine any greater joy than to have someone like her in your life.

(9) ... The chances for your grandson twenty years from now are equally bleak in this, one of the poorest countries on Earth. And despair floods your heart at the unfairness and futility of it all.

Just then, the cellphone in your pocket vibrates. You hold it to your ear, like a seashell ... and suddenly it hits you. This technology, with its trackless depths and changing moods, is the sea, and you are drowning in it. No wonder you can never be happy; it's like drinking the water of the ocean. There is too much of it, and the salt in it will never quench your thirst. This is where your feelings of lost chances and hopeless dreams have been coming from for all these years. This is the real root of your poverty.

You look around, and for the first time, perhaps, since you were a child, you see the marvellous beauty and endless fascination of your world on the fringes of the sea – on the shore, where you belong. And with an upsurging shout of joy and comprehension, you heave that phone as far as you can throw – back into the ocean your ancestors successfully crossed nearly two thousand years before.

## ENTERING THE GARDEN



ثُمَّ نُنَجِّي رُسُلَنَا وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا كَذَلِكَ حَقًّا عَلَيْنَا نُنَجِّ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ

**Then We save Our messengers and those who have believed. Just so is it compulsory for Us to save the faithful. (Q10:103)**

Believers are dying all the time, many of them through calamities such as natural disasters, genocides, and armed conflicts. AL-LĀH mentions not only the killing of the faithful in wars and persecutions, such as in (*Sūratil-Burūj*) of the Qur'ān, but even His messengers being murdered by their own people. What does it mean, then, for Him to say that **We save Our messengers and those who have believed**, if saving is not the same as rescuing from death? And in what sense is it **compulsory** for Him?

The answer is found in verses such as the following:

وَلَا تَقُولُوا لِمَنْ يُقْتَلُ فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ أَمْوَاتٌ بَلْ أَحْيَاءٌ وَلَكِنْ لَا تَشْعُرُونَ

**And do not say of those who have been killed upon the path of GOD 'Deceased.' Rather [say] 'Alive,' but you are not aware. (Q2:154)**

وَلَا تَحْسَبَنَّ الَّذِينَ قُتِلُوا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ أَمْوَاتًا بَلْ أَحْيَاءٌ عِنْدَ رَبِّهِمْ يُرْزَقُونَ

**And do not think that those who have been killed upon the path of GOD are dead. No, they live, provisioned, with their Lord. (Q3:169)**

These verses tell us not to equate apparent (i.e., bodily) life with real life. We do not physically see the latter, but are admonished to believe that those who have it are **with their Lord**. In other words, the Qur'ān is challenging our preconceptions of what it means to live and to die.

In the Qur'ān, then, 'saving' is a rescue not from corporeal death, which no mortal escapes, but from the spiritual death of those who



acknowledge nothing beyond **‘Deceased.’** Faith in a greater life, the Life of GOD, saves us from the greater death, the death of the spirit. By trusting in this Divine intervention, we can become the **friends of GOD for whom there is no fear and neither do they grieve (Q10:62).** The obligation GOD feels is that of friendship or guardianship, for **AL-LĀH is The Friend of those who have believed (Q2:257).** It is not something put upon Him (for nothing can compel Him) but rather an expression of His Divine Character.

The manner or magnitude of death does not affect this relationship between GOD and those whom He befriends. The greatest worldly disasters, however ‘evil’ their label may be, are occasions for AL-LĀH to reveal Himself, in situations like the nine scenarios of the previous Chapter, more compellingly to those whom He chooses. His Power is apparent in the scale of the catastrophe, but His Love is manifest to individuals who discover a new life glowing brighter in the darkness engulfing them. They are impelled more certainly to Him by their greater need in those final horrible moments. It is their need, expressed as yearning for His absolutes, that marks them out for salvation.

The onset or threat of death is a particularly propitious time for these openings to the Divine. In many cases, only something as relentless and heart-breaking as death or its close relatives – disaster, defeat, and disgrace – can force a soul entrenched in its comforts and assumptions to scurry out into the open and frantically survey its world with the keenness of what could be its last look. It is then that GOD swoops down, so to speak, and beckons the soul to rise to a higher, more expansive frame of mind and heart. From this new height, death can appear small, or providential, or even inviting, depending on that soul’s condition. This ascent into the vastness of the hitherto unknown is the path of faith, which on the field of battle is called **the path of GOD.**

It is of the utmost significance that those who sacrifice their lives for GOD are designated *shuhadā’*, or witnesses. In Ancient Greek, *mártur* had the same meaning. What inspires and enables the martyr’s extraordinary struggle in those closing moments is a vision that overwhelms or diminishes his fear. He sees another reality open up before him, and in the enthusiasm of that revelation he becomes, if only momentarily, a being transformed. But is it a vision of God he sees or, as we have come to suspect in the suicide attacks of recent years, an explosive mix of genuine ideals, exploitative propaganda, futile rage, savage despair, and a selfish obsession with heavenly rewards?

Even on the field of battle in a cause that is clearly for AL-LĀH, we cannot know for sure.

قَالَ حَدَّثَنِي عُمَرُ بْنُ الْخَطَّابِ قَالَ لَمَّا كَانَ يَوْمُ خَيْبَرَ أَقْبَلَ نَفَرٌ مِنْ صَحَابَةِ النَّبِيِّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ فَقَالُوا فُلَانٌ شَهِيدٌ فُلَانٌ شَهِيدٌ حَتَّى مَرُّوا عَلَى رَجُلٍ فَقَالُوا فُلَانٌ شَهِيدٌ فَقَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ كَلَّا إِنِّي رَأَيْتُهُ فِي النَّارِ فِي بُرْدَةٍ غَلَّهَا أَوْ عَبَاءَةٍ ثُمَّ قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ يَا ابْنَ الْخَطَّابِ اذْهَبْ فَنَادِ فِي النَّاسِ إِنَّهُ لَا يَدْخُلُ الْجَنَّةَ إِلَّا الْمُؤْمِنُونَ

*‘Umarub-nul-Khattāb narrated to me [‘Abdul-Lāhibni-‘Abbās], saying, “On the day of [the battle of] Khaibar, a group of the companions of the Prophet (may GOD bless him and give him peace) fell to saying, ‘So-and-so is a martyr; So-and-so is a martyr.’ Then they passed [the corpse of] a man and said, ‘So-and-so is a martyr’. Then the Messenger of GOD (may AL-LĀH bless him and give him peace) replied, ‘No; verily I saw him in the Fire, in a cloak or mantle that he had misappropriated.’ Then the Messenger of AL-LĀH (may GOD bless him and give him peace) said, ‘O Ibnal-Khattāb, go and call out among the people that no one will enter the Garden but the believers.’”*

(Ṣaḥīḥu Muslim, Book 1, Ḥadīth 216)

سَمِعْتُ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ يَقُولُ إِنَّ أَوَّلَ النَّاسِ يُفْضَى يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ عَلَيْهِ رَجُلٌ اسْتُشْهِدَ فَأُتِيَ بِهِ فَعَرَفَهُ نِعْمَةً فَعَرَفَهَا قَالَ فَمَا عَمِلْتَ فِيهَا قَالَ قَاتَلْتُ فِيكَ حَتَّى اسْتُشْهِدْتُ قَالَ كَذَبْتَ وَلَكِنَّكَ قَاتَلْتَ لِأَنْ يُقَالَ جَرِيءٌ فَقَدْ قِيلَ ثُمَّ أُمِرَ بِهِ فَسُجِبَ عَلَى وَجْهِهِ حَتَّى أُلْقِيَ فِي النَّارِ

*I [Abū Hurairah] heard the Messenger of AL-LĀH (may GOD bless him and give him peace) say, “The first of men to be judged on the Day of Resurrection will be one who was martyred. He will be brought forward and His blessings recounted to him, and he will acknowledge them. GOD will ask, ‘What did you do with them?’ He will say, ‘I fought for You till I was martyred.’ GOD will reply, ‘You lie. Rather you fought that it might be said [that you were] a warrior. And it has been said.’ Then it will be commanded that he be dragged upon his face and cast into the Fire.”*

(Ṣaḥīḥu Muslim, Book 33, Ḥadīth 218)

The same *ḥadīth* goes on to mention, in similar terms, the scholar who hopes for fame and wealth from his religious knowledge and the ostentatious donor to religious causes; they incur similar results.

The identity of **believers** is even more uncertain in the light of narrations such as this one:

عَنْ أَبِي هُرَيْرَةَ رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُ عَنْ رَسُولِ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ قَالَ غُفِرَ لِمَرْأَةٍ مُؤَمِّسَةٍ مَرَّتْ بِكَلْبٍ عَلَى رَأْسِ رَكِيٍّ يَلْهَثُ قَالَ كَادَ يَقْتُلُهُ الْعَطَشُ فَزَرَ عَتَّ حُقَّهَا فَأَوْثَقَتْهُ بِخِمَارِهَا فَزَرَ عَتَّ لَهُ مِنَ الْمَاءِ فَغُفِرَ لَهَا بِذَلِكَ

*From Abī Hurairah (may AL-LĀH be pleased with him), from the Messenger of AL-LĀH (may GOD bless him and give him peace), who said, “A woman was forgiven – a prostitute [who] passed by a dog beside a well, panting and nearly dead from thirst. So she took off her shoe, tied it with her headscarf, and drew out some water for it. She was forgiven on account of that.”*

*(Ṣaḥīḥul-Bukhārī, Book 59, Ḥadīth 127)*

The common element here, either present in the case of the prostitute or felt to be missing in the case of the pseudo-martyr, is sincerity (*ikhhlāṣ* in Arabic), a secret (*sirr*) in the heart of a believer that no one but GOD can see. Following a religion or participating in ‘holy’ acts does not prove its presence, and a history of sin or crime does not necessarily bar one from access to it. This element is what GOD aims to expose in those precious life crises that precede our admission, ready or not, to the Everafter. And it is this same mysterious and dynamic insight that enabled the characters in the previous chapter to ‘see’ their way to a greater absolute, even if they did not frame their enhanced realization in those terms.

Consider it this way. Our access to GOD is like drawing from a well. Each person’s well is different in terms of the length of rope he needs to reach water, what he uses to take it up, how often he draws, where he pours it, how pure it is, and what it tastes like to him. Remember, though, that the devoutest mystic and the stubbornest atheist have one thing in common – they are all drawing from the surface of the water in their well. No one can tell how deep it goes, or how all those individual wells are connected.

No one has a complete and comprehensive view of GOD, nor is there anyone who possesses all the absolutes by which He can be known. No one ‘arrives’ in GOD’s presence in the same way that one can arrive in the court of a king, despite the many parables that convey that impression,

simply because GOD cannot be localized in space, time, or even spirit. Rather we are all on an everlasting journey into His Infinity, participating in more absolutes as our knowledge of Him deepens and grows. Even the prophets and messengers of AL-LĀH (peace be upon all of them) are each identified with particular absolutes or manifestations of GOD, as Ibnul-‘Arabī propounded in some of his works, and thus have room to advance to ever higher ‘stations.’

The characters in the nine scenarios of Chapter 31 were all ‘saved’ (from the Proto-Indo-European root *\*solh<sub>2</sub>-*, to be whole or complete) in the light of an absolute (derived from the Latin *absolvo*, to loosen or set free) reflected from AL-LĀH, The Source and Owner of all absolutes.

1. The slave from Kalimantan attained freedom with the help of Al-Ghanī (The Independent).
2. The merchant in Yinchuan attained a realization of fairness from Al-‘Adl (The Just).
3. The sorceress in Tibet attained the gift of tenderness from Ar-Ra’ūf (The Kind).
4. The bridegroom in Arunachal Pradesh attained serenity from As-Salām (The Tranquil).
5. The grandmother in Yakutia attained a vision of grandeur from Al-‘Azīz (The Mighty).
6. The pilot in Greenland attained the rank of nobility from Al-Jalīl (The Exalted).
7. The cripple in Venezuela attained the state of love from Al-Wadūd (The Affectionate).
8. The pregnant schoolgirl in South Dakota attained a new start from Al-Mu’īd (The Restorer).
9. The fisherman in Madagascar attained a liberating insight from Al-Ḥakīm (The Wise).

No matter who we are, or where we are in our spiritual development, the door of yet another unrealized absolute awaits us. For some of us, nothing but a calamity or the onset of death can spur a soul to walk through that gate, to take that leap of faith which marks our nighttime journey (*isrā*) to AL-LĀH. There are many such moments of transition presented

as lessons and examples for us in the Qur'ān. No individual can afford to reject them when they appear, but many do.

وَلَقَدْ أَخَذْنَاهُمْ بِالْعَذَابِ فَمَا اسْتَكَانُوا لِرَبِّهِمْ وَمَا يَتَضَرَّعُونَ  
حَتَّىٰ إِذَا فَتَحْنَا عَلَيْهِم بَابًا ذَا عَذَابٍ شَدِيدٍ إِذَا هُمْ فِيهِ مُبْلِسُونَ

**Indeed, We overtook them with chastisement, but they would not yield to their Lord, nor would they supplicate, / Until We opened up a gate of heavy punishment for them, and then they fell into despair. (Q23:76–77)**

Even if we do accept the enlightenment or grace such moments represent, we cannot force them to huddle tamely behind the walls of our sectarian assumptions because we think we are their gatekeepers.

وَقَالُوا لَنْ يَدْخُلَ الْجَنَّةَ إِلَّا مَنْ كَانَ هُودًا أَوْ نَصَارَىٰ تِلْكَ أَمَانِيُّهُمْ قُلْ  
هَاتُوا بُرْهَانَكُمْ إِن كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ  
بَلَىٰ مَنْ أَسْلَمَ وَجْهَهُ لِلَّهِ وَهُوَ مُحْسِنٌ فَلَهُ أَجْرُهُ عِنْدَ رَبِّهِ وَلَا خَوْفٌ  
عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحْزَنُونَ

**They say, “No one shall enter Paradise unless he is a Jew or Christian.” That is wishful thinking on their part. Say, “Bring your proof if you are truthful.” / Nay, but one who has turned his face submissively to GOD and does his best obtains his compensation from his Lord, and he has nothing more to fear nor need he grieve. (Q2:111–112)**

No one is guaranteed admission to the Garden simply on the basis of a nominal belonging to this or that religion. Rather, as the verse states, there are two conditions: 1) that one submits to GOD, and 2) that one verifies this submission by performing *ihsān*, or excellence, as defined by the tradition, *Excellence is that you worship GOD as if you see Him, and if you cannot see Him, truly He sees you*. Broadly understood, excellence can also be an act that manifests one of GOD’s absolutes, such as those exemplified by the nine scenarios, or the story of the prostitute and the dog, or in traditions such as this one in *Jāmi’ut-Tirmidhī, Book 48, Ḥadīth 139*:

عَنْ أَبِي هُرَيْرَةَ عَنِ النَّبِيِّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ قَالَ إِنَّ لِلَّهِ تِسْعَةً  
وَتِسْعِينَ اسْمًا مَنْ أَحْصَاهَا دَخَلَ الْجَنَّةَ

*From Abī Hurairah, from the Prophet (may GOD bless him and give him peace), who said, “Verily AL-LĀH has ninety-nine Names; whoever has enumerated them has entered the Garden.”*

عَنْ أَبِي سَعِيدٍ الْخُدْرِيِّ أَنَّ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ قَالَ لَا يَكُونُ لِأَحَدٍ ثَلَاثُ بَنَاتٍ أَوْ ثَلَاثُ أَخَوَاتٍ فَيُحْسِنُ إِلَيْهِنَّ إِلَّا دَخَلَ الْجَنَّةَ

*From Abī Sa’īdinil-Khudrīyī, that the Messenger of AL-LĀH (may GOD bless him and give him peace) said, “Anyone who has three daughters or three sisters and is good to them has entered the Garden.”*

(Al-Adabul-Mufrad 79)

The canonic literature pertaining to the Garden is detailed, abundant, and immensely challenging for anyone who wants a simple answer to the question, ‘What must I do to be saved?’ The dilemma in determining a judgement on one’s own conduct can be highlighted by this *ḥadīth*:

عَنْ عَبْدِ اللَّهِ قَالَ قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ لَا يَدْخُلُ النَّارَ أَحَدٌ فِي قَلْبِهِ مِثْقَالُ حَبَّةٍ خَرَدَلٍ مِنْ إِيْمَانٍ وَلَا يَدْخُلُ الْجَنَّةَ أَحَدٌ فِي قَلْبِهِ مِثْقَالُ حَبَّةٍ خَرَدَلٍ مِنْ كِبْرِيَاءَ

*From ‘Abdil-Lāhi, who said, “The Messenger of AL-LĀH (may GOD bless him and give him peace) said, ‘No one enters the Fire in whose heart is a mustard seed’s weight of faith, and no enters the Garden in whose heart is a mustard seed’s weight of pride.’”*

(Ṣaḥīḥu Muslim, Book 1, Ḥadīth 172)

What happens to the soul who has equal amounts of faith and pride? What about the soul who has committed both deeds that condemn one to the Fire (such as the woman who *injures her neighbours by her tongue*) and actions that assure one’s entry to Paradise? And then we read:

عَنْ أَبِي هُرَيْرَةَ قَالَ قَالَ النَّبِيُّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ لَنْ يُنَجِّيَ أَحَدًا مِنْكُمْ عَمَلٌ قَالُوا وَلَا أَنْتَ يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ قَالَ وَلَا أَنَا إِلَّا أَنْ يَتَغَمَّدَنِي اللَّهُ مِنْهُ بِرَحْمَةٍ

*From Abī Hurairah, who said, “The Prophet (may GOD bless him and give him peace) said, ‘Not one of you will be saved by deeds.’ ‘Not even you, O Messenger of GOD?’ He replied, ‘Not even me, unless GOD envelops me in Mercy.’”*

(Al-Adabul-Mufrad 461)

Entering the Garden, therefore, is never just the outcome of being born into the right religion or any other similar technicality. Like faith, which is its prerequisite, it is the act of a heart that is drawn towards GOD Himself. To enter the Garden is to enter His Kingdom, the Domain of Fruitfulness. Paradise, in other words, is a metonym, a way of referring to the Absolute by a complex image that represents all our deepest desires for absolutes like happiness, growth, and beauty.

The Qur'ān portrays those heartfelt ideals in physical terms, but a believer should never disparage their literality or sensory 'surface' as unworthy of the Reality that infuses them. After the first appearance of Paradise in the Qur'ān (2:25), we are immediately reminded that AL-LĀH is not ashamed of (i.e., disconnected from) any parable, no matter how small the example, let alone those (such as the Garden) that are greater. GOD, Beyond time and place, is Infinitely Present to us in all good places and pleasures. That is what faith in GOD really means. It is the flowering of an individual reality, namely a believer's faith, within The Real, one of whose Names is Al-Mu'min (The Faithful).

# 33.

## RELIGION IN FAITH



وَلِكُلِّ وِجْهَةً هُوَ مُوَلِّيُّهَا فَاسْتَبِقُوا الْخَيْرَاتِ أَيْنَ مَا تَكُونُوا يَأْتِ بِكُمُ  
اللَّهُ جَمِيعًا إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ

**For each there is a goal to which he turns, so vie with one another in good deeds. Wherever you may be, AL-LĀH will bring you all together. Verily AL-LĀH has power over everything. (Q2:148)**

The Qur'ān is extremely hard – impossible, I would say – to wrap up into a comprehensive and consistent system. (I consider that a positive feature, by the way.) It is certainly harder than most of its readers realize, given that they, in almost all cases, approach it through the thick and comforting filter of their religion, culture, or personal experience. Everything I have quoted thus far from the canonical literature can be and usually is interpreted to equate faith with Islam and believers with Muslims. That is why I deliberately left out Muslims from the nine scenarios in Chapter 31.

In all nine cases, the chance that those characters would encounter Islam or become Muslim in the culturally specific and conventional sense of the word today was practically zero. You, the reader, or I, the author, could easily have been one of those individuals – someone with no practical opportunity to absorb a particular set of Islamic doctrines or be exposed to the actual text of the Qur'ān. Yet those imaginary persons, like billions of Ādam's progeny since the beginning of time, experienced a crisis in their relation to the Absolute that no true account of faith can afford to ignore. In other words, if your version of faith automatically excludes such persons, that version is, for me, incomprehensibly unfair and unworthy of respect.

We must and do find in the Qur'ān a faith that encompasses the entirety of human experience, one that is powerful enough to both go beyond religion and nonetheless be highly supportive of those who express their faith through religion. Faith is in GOD, and GOD's Domain, notwithstanding its limitless scope, is intimately connected to the heart of every human



being who has ever lived, and established there a primal citizenship of perfect equality, obtained solely by faith. Nothing but faith makes all of us – rich and poor, competent and feeble, old and young, clever and naïve – completely equal. (The faith of infants and children, for example, though in one sense undeveloped, could turn out to be greater than that of adults.) It is only fair, therefore, that all humans, without exception, should have equal access to it. GOD's Justice demands it, and so do I.

AL-LĀH is The GOD of all and, as the verse above declares, He brings us all together in the end. Those who, despite their better natures, exclude Him from their vacuous versions of reality incur penalties – penalties that are ultimately obliterated by His Greater Mercy. **I unleash My punishment on whom I will. And My compassion comprehends all things (Q7:156).** In His Decisions we find total ethical justice, the basis of which is recognized by all religions and the non-religious alike:

مَنْ عَمِلَ صَالِحًا فَلِنَفْسِهِ وَمَنْ أَسَاءَ فَعَلَيْهَا وَمَا رَبُّكَ بِظَلَّامٍ لِّلْعَبِيدِ

**The deed of one who acts for good is for himself, and evil falls upon the evildoer. And your Lord is not unjust to those who serve. (Q41:46)**

Indeed, the closer you are to the truth, the greater the punishment if you should neglect or oppose it, as I explained in Chapter 23 regarding this verse: **AL-LĀH said, “Truly I shall send it down to you. Then as for him who disbelieves among you afterwards, I shall inflict a punishment with which I will not punish any other [living being] of the worlds.” (Q5:115)**

It is the current state of one's heart that counts in the end, and not one's external advantages, such as membership in a particular group, or even previous God-given favours. ***“Verily AL-LĀH does not attend to your physiques or your appearances, but pays attention to your hearts.”***

In an age when parochialism and nationalism are on the rise, and religion is too often seen as the possession of particular ethnicities, cultures, or sects, we need constantly to be reminded that faith and religion are not the same. Faith, when rightly understood, is inclusive, non-denominational, and affirmative. Given its many negative and exclusive associations, the common conception of religion (which does not adequately capture the meaning of the Qur'ānic *dīn*) needs to be clearly distinguished from the far more powerful and vibrant delineation of faith (*īmān*) in the Qur'ān, as in the following verses:

**The desert Arabs say, “We have believed.” Tell [them], “You do not have faith, but say, ‘We have submitted’; faith has not yet come into your hearts.” (Q49:15)**

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَالَّذِينَ هَادُوا وَالصَّابِئُونَ وَالنَّصَارَى مَنْ آمَنَ بِاللَّهِ  
وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ وَعَمِلَ صَالِحًا فَلَا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحْزَنُونَ

Truly those who have believed, and those who have been Jews, and the Sabians<sup>MM</sup>, and the Christians – those who have believed in GOD and in the Final Day and acted righteously – they have no need to fear nor do they grieve. (Q5:69)

#### MM

These Sabians are not to be confused with the Sabeans or Sabaeans, the people of the ancient southern Arab kingdom of Saba', which is also mentioned in the Qur'ān.

Notice here, and in similar verses (Q22:17 and Q2:62), that the believers are not identified as Muslims. There are, moreover, verses in the Qur'ān that specifically identify believers from among the People of the Book, such as Q3:113–115:

لَيْسُوا سَوَاءً مِنْ أَهْلِ الْكِتَابِ أُمَّةٌ قَائِمَةٌ يَتْلُونَ آيَاتِ اللَّهِ آنَاءَ اللَّيْلِ  
وَهُمْ يَسْجُدُونَ

يُؤْمِنُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ وَيَأْمُرُونَ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَيَنْهَوْنَ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ  
وَيُسَارِعُونَ فِي الْخَيْرَاتِ وَأُولَئِكَ مِنَ الصَّالِحِينَ  
وَمَا يَفْعَلُوا مِنْ خَيْرٍ فَلَنْ يُكْفَرُوهُ وَاللَّهُ عَلِيمٌ بِالْمُتَّقِينَ

They are not all alike. Among the People of the Book are a community who stand in recitation of the verses of AL-LĀH throughout the night and do prostrations. / They believe in GOD and in the Final Day, enjoin the right, prohibit what is wrong, are eager to do good, and count among the virtuous. / Whatever good they do will not be spurned. And GOD is well aware who are the vigilant.

Those who have believed in GOD and in the Final Day and acted righteously do not constitute a sectarian group per se, so we can say that faith is not confined to a particular religion. How, then, do we make sense of the following?

إِنَّ الدِّينَ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ الْإِسْلَامُ

Truly the religion with AL-LĀH is Al-Islām [Submission]. (Q3:19)

وَمَنْ يَبْتَغِ غَيْرَ الْإِسْلَامِ دِينًا فَلَنْ يُقْبَلَ مِنْهُ وَهُوَ فِي الْآخِرَةِ مِنَ  
الْخَاسِرِينَ

**Whatever the religion one desires other than Submission will not be accepted from him, and he is among the losers in the Everafter. (Q3:85)**

الْيَوْمَ أَكْمَلْتُ لَكُمْ دِينَكُمْ وَأَتِمَمْتُ عَلَيْكُمْ نِعْمَتِي وَرَضِيْتُ لَكُمُ الْإِسْلَامَ دِينًا

**Today I have perfected your religion for you. I have made complete My favour to you, and approved for you Submission as religion. (Q5:3)**

Do these verses not contradict the assertion that faith transcends religion?

To be quite clear, AL-LĀH does not say that the only faith He will accept is that of Muslims. On the contrary, He affirms that

وَمَا كَانَ اللَّهُ لِيُضِيعَ إِيمَانَكُمْ

**It does not behoove AL-LĀH to waste your faith. (Q2:143)**

أَنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُضِيعُ أَجْرَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ

**Truly GOD does not neglect the wages of the faithful. (Q3:171)**

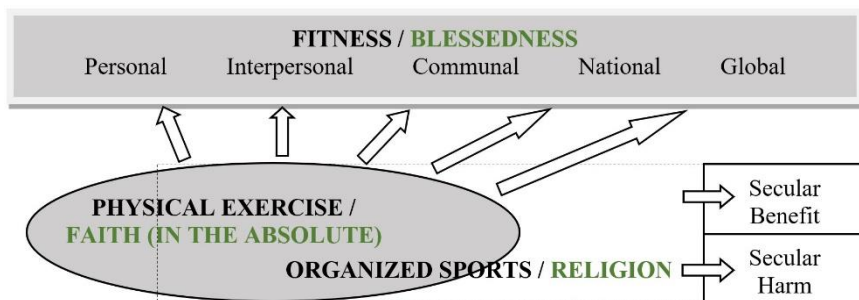
Rather, insofar as you approach GOD with a religion – an organized way of life, with its doctrines and practices – then it should be Submission (i.e., Islam). This is now, as of **Today**, the only acceptable expression of faith in religious terms. But that criterion by itself does not negate one's faith.

In the nine scenarios I presented in Chapter 31, the main characters did not explicitly desire anything contrary to Islam. Rather they all submitted, each in his or her own way, to the only absolutes available to them in those circumstances. It would be both extremely strange and highly unfair to dismiss their efforts in not only reaching for the heights but actually lunging beyond themselves to discover the Highest they could find in those critical moments. This is why the saying **Truly GOD does not neglect the wages of the faithful** is so important. It validates the good choices of the vast majority of humanity who have never had a chance to consider Islam in its doctrinal, systematized form.

On the other hand, the particular form of Submission taught by countless prophets from Ādam (peace be upon him) up to and including Muḥammad (may GOD bless him and give him peace) constitutes the kind

of guidance humanity, in the ordinary course of life, would find most useful in order to be prepared for crises such as imminent death or devastating loss. To knowingly desire some other religion without the same divine imprimatur, despite Submission being the best expression of faith in religious terms, does indeed place one **among the losers in the Everafter**. How much of a loss does this entail? Is it counter-balanced by the amount owing as **wages of the faithful**? Only GOD knows what lies within the hearts of His servants, what their motivations are for accepting or rejecting something, and what rewards or chastisement they deserve. We need not, and should not, judge. Our task is only to **give good news to the believers**. (Q2:223)

To do so, here is a diagram that illustrates the underlying connections among faith, religion, and admission to the Garden (i.e., blessedness). To clarify their relationships, I am using physical exercise, organized sports, and physical fitness as analogues.



**A1)** All of us who are living are engaged in physical exercise, even if by the mere motion of our heart and lungs, and to that extent we are ‘fit’, that is, fit for life. This is not, of course, what we normally mean by physical exercise or fitness.

**A2)** Every living thing needs faith to function in an environment replete with both excess information and uncertainty. The simple act of processing sensory data requires a modicum of affirmation, of choosing ‘Yes’ and determining ‘No.’ When the Qur’ān mentions faith (*īmān*), however, it is usually (but not always) understood to be faith in GOD.

The outcome or reward for faith in GOD is blessedness. Consider this to be like positive feedback from AL-LĀH, motivating us to continue seeking and striving. It is not quite the same as happiness or pleasure,<sup>NN</sup>

# NN

One of the absolutes that culminate in AL-LĀH is happiness. To be with GOD is to dwell in the Home of Peace (*dāris-salām*), and Peace (*As-Salām*), which also means soundness, well-being, and safety, is one of GOD's Beautiful Names. In one sense, GOD is Happiness – Absolute Happiness, which is beyond our capacity to comprehend or even enjoy in full.

As an absolute, and as a kind of metaphor for GOD Himself, happiness certainly has a part to play in any complete account of the Qur'ānic world view. To the extent that a person aims for happiness in **seeking the Pleasure of AL-LĀH (Q2:265)**, therefore, utilitarianism accords with the ethics of the Qur'ān.

But utilitarianism is not content with recognizing the importance of happiness for all ("for all" distinguishing it from hedonism, which is happiness for just oneself). Rather it prescribes utility as the standard in all ethical judgements, as per its leading proponent, J.S. Mill:

The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure.\*

From an Islamic perspective, there are four basic problems with this approach:

1. Happiness is an absolute, like beauty, knowledge, and power, but there are other absolutes that are intrinsically ethical, such as justice. Happiness, as Mill uses it, however, derives its value from his rating it as a measurable fact, which he hints at by the word "proportion". In Chapter 27 and Chapter 34, I argue that values, including ethical ones, cannot be derived from facts.

2. Utilitarianism is a special form of consequentialism, in which the worth of actions is judged solely by their consequences. But the foundation of Islamic ethics is the famous hadith: **"Actions are only [judged] by intentions."** (*Ḥadīth 1, 40 Ḥadīth an-Nawawī*)

3. In Utilitarianism, Mill struggles with the issue of how to assess various kinds and degrees of happiness. He is forced to admit into the discussion an element that he must on principle exclude, namely quality, as we

\* J. S. Mill, from Volume 43 of the *Great Books of the Western World: Utilitarianism*, p. 448.

NN (continued)

see with his “better” – “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied.”\*\* This “better,” however, is disputable in all sorts of ways, and impossible to measure.

4. In the light of an eternal Everafter and GOD’s Perfect Knowledge of what is most useful in promoting real, lasting happiness, our time- and space-bound utilitarian calculations are feeble, futile, and ultimately false. And without such calculations, utilitarianism itself is useless.

وَإِنْ تَعُدُّوا نِعْمَةَ اللَّهِ لَا تُحْصُوهَا

And if you were to count the bounty of AL-LĀH, you could not reckon it.  
(Q14:34)

\*\*Ibid., p. 449.

for a believer will persevere in her faith even at the cost of pain, sorrow, disappointment, and death. But in doing so she becomes fit for life – the ‘other’ life, that of the spirit.

**B1)** Physically fit individuals are, all else being equal (*ceteris paribus*), better persons in general, and their being fit is a positive influence on their relationships, on their community, on their country, and on humanity as a whole. That influence is even more likely to be productive when magnified by the interpersonal and communal bonding inherent in organized sports.

**B2)** Having faith in the Absolute is not the same as having a religion. While ‘religious’ people can be all the various grades of humanity that we see in religions today, including some of the very worst specimens imaginable, a believer in the Absolute is, by definition, someone oriented to the highest aspects of his own character and at least some of the highest ideals of his time and place.

Insofar as all of us must believe in something, we are all believers. But to have faith in the Absolute is to reach above oneself to the Supreme Good. That tendency, *ceteris paribus*, can only be positive, no matter how one names that Good. The original purpose of religion is to magnify and concentrate this tendency through unified, communal striving and commitment.

**C1)** Physical exercise can be either individual – uncoordinated with others’ activities – or performed in a social milieu. Most social contexts for physical exercise are organized to a greater or lesser extent, and some, such as professional football matches or badminton tournaments, are highly regulated and usually involve spectators, various officials, and auxiliary and service staff. Participants are often more motivated to be physically fit in an organized context than individually.

**C2)** While faith is an individual activity, no one’s faith operates in a vacuum. Our social and cultural environment, our predispositions from birth, and the particular events that shape our character (and GOD is implicated in all of these) help determine our capacity for faith and what type of faith it will be. Faith requires effort; we need all the help and motivation we can get to maintain and strengthen it. Religion provides that support.

But religion in any form comes at a cost, namely conformity to the rules and attitudes that make it organized, effective, and identifiable. Initially a reference point and safe harbour for the faithful, religion eventually develops the protective structures that make it an institution and a system. Increasing numbers begin to take shelter in it, and soon consider faith to be a by-product of the institution rather than its living source and final cause (i.e., reason for being). As religion looms ever larger and faith becomes ever more obscure, more and more religious participants fit into it without themselves being spiritually ‘fit.’ Many make a living out of it or find comfort in it, while others take part as onlookers and nominal members, without any real commitment or effort other than going through the motions.

**D1)** While all physical exercise, including participation in organized sports, results in fitness, there are non-physical aspects of organized sports that produce various beneficial and harmful side effects. A football stadium, for example, provides income for a large number of groundskeepers, food vendors, security personnel, et cetera. Football fans develop a feeling of solidarity with their like-minded neighbours, performing acts of generosity and compassion that would not occur otherwise. At the same time, their communal cohesion can produce malignant feelings towards other teams’ supporters. Their emotional involvement can contribute to drunkenness, vandalism, riots, and even wars. Sports usually offer a safe outlet and diversion for the wanton energies and pent-up pressures in the population, and are generally considered one of the best means for training and shaping the character of youth. But a national obsession with sports probably means other problems are not being properly addressed.

**D2)** Religion, likewise, has a ‘spillover’ effect, regardless of the actual faith of its members, by virtue of the social capital it generates. Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist with a secular, liberal mindset, explains this in a chapter entitled ‘*Religion is a Team Sport*,’ where he quotes two political scientists, Robert Putnam and David Campbell:

By many different measures religiously observant Americans are better neighbors and better citizens than secular Americans – they are more generous with their time and money, especially in helping the needy, and they are more active in community life.<sup>15</sup>

Like sports, marriage, commerce, and almost all human activities and institutions, religion has a dark side that only faith can control. When its adherents’ faith declines, these shadowy aspects become ever more pronounced. But to ignore the vast and documented benefits of religion through the ages and to consider eliminating it on account of its negative side effects would be like banning sports because of its match penalties, injuries, and occasional riots, or outlawing marriage due to instances of domestic violence. As Haidt argues in his book,

Religions are moral exoskeletons. If you live in a religious community, you are enmeshed in a set of norms, relationships, and institutions that work primarily ... to influence your behavior. But if you are an atheist living in a looser community with a less binding moral matrix, you might have to rely somewhat more on an internal moral compass ... . That might sound appealing to rationalists, but it is also a recipe for anomie ... . We evolved to live, trade, and trust within shared moral matrices. When societies lose their grip on individuals, allowing all to do as they please, the result is often a decrease in happiness and an increase in suicide, as Durkheim showed more than a hundred years ago.

Societies that forego the exoskeleton of religion should reflect carefully on what will happen to them over several generations. We don’t really know, because the first atheistic societies have only emerged in Europe in the last few decades. They are the least efficient societies ever known at turning resources (of which they have a lot) into offspring (of which they have few).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, p. 267.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 269.

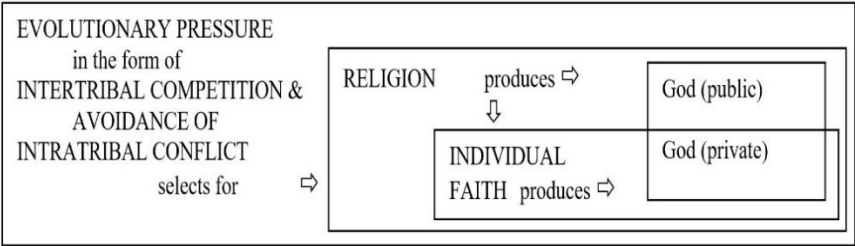


Religion, Haidt argues, has survived and flourished because it offers what moral societies need to function effectively, namely a transcendent, unquestionable authority. Of the many communes that were founded in America over the past hundred years or more, the longest-lasting were those that demanded a higher degree of discipline and subordination from their followers – the religious communes. In the same way, he contends, the most effective societies are those that have the strongest sense of unchallengeable values, to which all members can turn as a common goal and reference point. Religions are the vehicles that translate these values into rituals, communal acts, and commonly held beliefs. And transcendence is the glue that binds them together by virtue of its higher authority.

All this is true, as far as it goes, but these basic observations are then harnessed to the modern evolutionary narrative by which everything uniquely human, such as religion, art, music, and language, is ultimately explainable in terms of its competitive advantage and survival value. As a social psychologist, Haidt thinks that this account makes wonderful sense of an otherwise inexplicable feature of human society – namely, religion – and so disagrees with contemporary atheist commentators who consider it maladaptive and archaic.

If we view religion as a device by which tribes or clans gain the cohesion and enthusiasm they need to prevail over competing groups – a process that can be referred to as ‘group dynamics’ – we have, Haidt would argue, a sufficient justification for the role that religion has played in human history. Believers in the Qur’ān cannot deny this function of religion, for there are plenty of verses and *aḥādīth* that emphasize these same features of *dīn*. But where does this explanation lead us? Secular thinkers like Haidt point downwards, to the struggle for survival, as the root cause of religion and all the other aspects of culture that distinguish us from animals. Believers point upwards, to GOD as the Source of everything in our environment, including religion, that leads us back to Him.

The secular narrative can be represented roughly this way:



On this showing, ‘God’ is an intellectual product in the mind of the individual believer and/or an object of communal faith in a religion, which is a device generated from the pressure to maintain a cohesive community and out-compete rival tribes. ‘Evolution’ is the greater frame in which all of this takes place, and thus satisfies the demand of science for a theory that elegantly accounts for human history and spirituality in terms of lifeless matter and mechanical algorithms.

Does the Qur’ān have a cogent reply to this reductionist argument? What does GOD have to say to those who repackage Him as a small thing inside a box (faith) inside a box (religion) inside a box (evolution)?

## EVALUATING EVOLUTION



We are told that natural selection – the process by which differences in organisms result in greater or lesser opportunities for survival and reproduction – is amoral. It has no aim or direction; rather it operates according to a model of population dynamics that takes only genetic and environmental variables into account regardless of what a particular organism is meant to do or what it intends to do. Purpose and intention are irrelevant. We need not consider agency or intelligence when we are talking about the complex interactions of lifeless genes, proteins, and mutations.

With this foundation, it has always been a challenge to account for the emergence of morality. How did the notions of good and evil, or right and wrong, come into the picture?

The Wikipedia article on “Evolutionary Ethics” provides a handy summary of three possible answers.<sup>17</sup> We could summarize them thus:

- Evolution tells us what our ethics are (descriptive evolutionary ethics).
- Evolution tells us what our ethics should be (normative evolutionary ethics).
- Evolution tells us that our ethics are not real, but rather an illusion (evolutionary meta-ethics).

The narrative of descriptive evolutionary ethics portrays morality as arising from the competitive advantages that primitive human groups enjoyed by enforcing loyalty to the tribe and conformity to its norms, and by encouraging the growth of values that promoted fairness, mutual care, love within families, and general altruism. Normative evolutionary ethics goes one step further, prescribing what values we should maintain for the sake of an overarching communal, national, or pan-human super-standard (i.e.,

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<sup>17</sup> From Wikipedia: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evolutionary\\_ethics](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evolutionary_ethics).

survival). And evolutionary meta-ethics accepts the argument that bundling all ethics into one pseudo-value, namely survival, makes no sense, and so questions the objectivity or intelligibility of any morality whatsoever in light of the obvious truths of evolution.

Common to all three positions, however, is the belief that ethics is derivative. If the descriptive version is accepted, then evolution, in the form of group dynamics, produced ethics. This would be analogous to the manager of a milk processing plant taking credit for the fact that consumers drink milk. Having accepted the manager's authority to make such a claim, we might agree that he could tell us what kinds of milk to drink, or how or when to drink it, if we are to succeed as milk-drinkers – a normative position. If, however, we decided to produce our own milk, he could then peremptorily assure us that we would be fooling ourselves, since milk is not a natural substance but merely a complex combination of lipids and proteins, and only processing plants know the formula.

What does it mean for us to turn to a fact-based narrative like evolution to account for our values? It can only mean this – that we no longer know how to value our values. If I tell you that I believe in honesty (a value), for example, because that is how I get ahead in the world (a fact), what does that say about my commitment to honesty (and all my other morals)? We could go even further, and say that if we believe that life arises from the unliving, what does that say about our lives?<sup>00</sup>

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The dominant form of worship in today's secular society takes scientific fact as the ultimate authority. Ironically, as I mentioned before in Chapter 27, facts are highly valued because of the belief that they are value-free. The Qur'ān often mentions this contradiction of attributing worth to things that are thought to be worthless. In such a system, benefit and harm are nothing but pseudo-ethical terms for rating an organism's chance of survival – a brute fact.

وَيَعْبُدُونَ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ مَا لَا يَنْفَعُهُمْ وَلَا يَضُرُّهُمْ وَكَانَ الْكَافِرُ عَلَىٰ رَبِّهِ ظَهِيرًا

**They worship, rather than AL-LĀH, what gives them neither benefit nor harm. The infidel has ever taken sides against his Lord. (Q25:55)**

In a frame whose root principles are facts, where organisms are nothing more than machines that improbably won the evolutionary lottery of random mutation, values and life as we know it are, in fact, foreign elements, intruders. Ethics must be demoralized and esthetics anesthetized – rendered aimless and insensate – if they are to make sense in an ultimately unfeeling world. A strictly physical world has no space for metaphysics, and no time for timeless truths. A materialistic frame demands that no whole be greater than its parts, that everything be reducible to its constituent atoms, to dust. What we have, in short, is a universe conceived according to the dictates, not of Life, but Death.

‘Cheer up,’ says the materialist. ‘It may sound bad, but at least it’s true!’ And right there is the irony of it all. The materialist can cheerfully devalue the universe and empty it of all transcendent meaning for the sake of his last remaining value – truth. But if we are nothing but machines, ultimately soulless and lifeless, of what use is truth? For the sake of a single value, we deny all others, and then find our own selves so devalued that we mean nothing to the god for whom this cosmic waste was made. Nor, logically, should it mean anything to us.

But if values do not exist in and of themselves, independent of matter, then neither does truth, and the whole conceptual edifice of evolutionary ethics collapses in a normless, useless desert of its own making. I am reminded once again of Tarski’s undefinability theorem, that “Each language owes its ultimate validation to a higher metalanguage.” The overly ambitious narrative of evolutionary ethics fails because it has nothing to validate its own framework (a self-referencing privilege appropriate to no one but GOD) and claims to account for elements ostensibly within it, namely values, that paradoxically account for it.

While the evolutionary narrative must reduce God, faith, religion, and all other human phenomena to the same low level as mere objects of belief, historical data, or sociological facts, the GOD of the Qur’ān is, on the contrary, sufficiently Generous (Al-Karīm) and Vast (Al-Wāsi’) to comprehend evolutionary ethics with all its principles and methodologies intact as a viable theory with real explanatory power. It does no harm to the theory of evolution to point out that, by its very nature, it cannot explain the values that govern it and other theories, and indeed the entire normative realm (**al-amr**) that, along with facts (**al-khalq**), makes up the constitution of the cosmos. **Truly His are the Creation (al-khalq) and Command (al-amr). Blessed be AL-LĀH, The Master of the worlds! (Q7:54)**

The Qur'ānic model is open to science and whatever else GOD makes, while scientistic systems (i.e., ones that, unlike scientific systems, claim science can explain everything) are closed to whatever they portray as lacking evidence. The Qur'ānic model includes both facts and values; scientism stops at what it believes are facts alone. The Qur'ānic model motivates a broad swathe of humanity; scientism appeals, by the values it espouses (values that have no place in it, however), to a small, educated, and privileged minority. Yes, the Qur'ānic model moralizes, as humans cannot help but do; scientism demoralizes, as it cannot help but do. The Qur'ānic model establishes, stabilizes, and shapes societies; scientism attempts to explain them in the dim light of an abstract rationality. The Qur'ānic model affirms life, celebrates beauty, promotes love, calms the heart, and activates the mind in ways that uplift and inspire; the aim of scientism is to reduce everything to ones and zeros.

No single schematic or system can adequately depict the scale of complexity and intricacy in the connections between the mutually implicit facts and values that are intertwined throughout our universe. The direction and degree of causality in all this are uncertain. To take but one example, the common secular assumption that the struggle for survival explains religion could be reversed. Riffing on the modern atheist notion that religion is a virus that replicates itself in human cultures, we could consider religions (along with pseudo-scientific theories like evolutionary ethics) as complex life forms that keep the human race alive for their own purposes. In other words, religion explains human survival. (And when religion wanes, as in modern secular culture, we experience low birth rates, social malaise, and a greater incidence of suicide.)

The Qur'ānic view is not far from this counter-intuitive perspective. Humanity is indeed GOD's chosen medium for propagating His values through the universe.

وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَاكَ إِلَّا رَحْمَةً لِّلْعَالَمِينَ

**And We have not deputed you except to be a mercy to the worlds. (Q21:107)**

إِنَّهُ يَبْدَأُ الْخَلْقَ ثُمَّ يُعِيدُهُ لِيَجْزِيَ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ  
بِالْقِسْطِ

**Truly He begins creation then repeats it so He might reward with justice those who have believed and done good deeds. (Q10:4)**

We could develop an alternate narrative that describes human evolution as a fragile, intermittent, and potentially upward growth in awareness of what higher purposes our lives actually serve – values far greater than mere survival. Religion is the unfolding of this meta-history within not only history as a whole but even our spiritual history as individuals. Our personal stories mean much more, and go on for far longer, than merely surviving until we can reproduce – after which, from the ‘selfish gene’ perspective, there is nothing left for us to do but die.

That brings us to another point about the secular narrative of evolution that its proponents rarely discuss. The theory itself is maladaptive for the beings it addresses. Where would we be now if our distant ancestors threw away their supposedly misconceived morals and faith in a Higher Power and fervently believed, instead, in a life with no purpose, no meaning, and no ethics other than some abstract imperative to perpetuate their genes? What will happen to the human race if we all adopt this stunted version of reality as the basis of future generations’ bedtime stories, judicial systems, and social engineering?

When talking about ethics, the materialist theorists of today are constantly directing our attention downwards, to chimpanzees, dolphins, elephants, dogs, ants, bees, and amoebae as the exemplars of our morality. In their exhaustive surveys of moral life, the lower they can go the better. If the intention is to show how ultimately uplifting the imperatives of ethical life can be (as even amoebae have a sense of what is good or bad for them) I see no problem. But if the aim is not to lift our gaze but to debase it, to show how degraded our motives really are, then they are working at cross-purposes to what morality actually means – the search for higher ends.

Values always imply the ultimate, not the minimum. They become values by their direction, not their natal or prenatal records. Reducing them to genetic mechanisms is a category error of the worst sort, like explaining a palace by counting the bricks and stones and planks that were used to build it while failing to mention for what purpose and what kinds of people palaces are erected.

When we consider our best acts to be nothing but ploys for reproductive success, either at the individual or group level, they are not ‘best’ in any meaningful way. Sophisticated, yes, but they are no longer ‘moral.’ The concept of final causes, or doing things for higher ends, is alien to physicalist science, and hence excluded from evolutionist accounts of human morality. The life has been sucked out of them, since the narrative underlying them is reducible to lifeless matter.

To coin a term, until I can find a better one, I would call this approach de-signification. Rather than enhancing meaning, it de-means whatever it touches by subtracting life-enhancing values, clear signs of the Divine, until it arrives at some lowest possible denominator – survival, random mutation, subatomic particles, or whatever. We try to breathe some greater narrative into them with our convoluted ‘just so’ stories of primordial soup and chemical reactions, but the odds of their finally generating human morality are about the same as the chance of a fire coming from two sticks lying side by side instead of rubbing them together (i.e., by purposeful involvement). Neither the soup nor the sticks feel the need for meaning, so why do we?

قُلْ هَلْ مِنْ شُرَكَائِكُمْ مَنْ يَهْدِي إِلَى الْحَقِّ قُلْ اللَّهُ يَهْدِي لِلْحَقِّ أَفَمَنْ يَهْدِي إِلَى الْحَقِّ أَحَقُّ أَنْ يُتَّبَعَ أَمْ لَا يَهْدِي إِلَّا أَنْ يُهْدَىٰ فَمَا لَكُمْ كَيْفَ تَحْكُمُونَ

Say, “Is there one among your partners who gives guidance to the Truth?” Say, “GOD gives guidance to the Truth.” Is One Who guides to Truth more worthy to be followed, or whoever cannot guide unless by being guided? What is wrong with you; how do you judge? (Q10:35)

The principle here is that Truth implies prior or concomitant Consciousness and Intention. Unconscious, unwilling entities are incapable of replacing GOD as a guide to **the Truth**, or any truth.

The value of scientific statements is that they are, or aim to be, true from a scientific perspective, (i.e., factual). They become so by rigorously and deliberately excluding all other values from their mode of operation, and their optimum form is an equation like  $11 \times 2 = 22$ . The ‘value’ here is in the ‘=,’ which is what makes the statement a fact and not a mere notation like ‘22.’

The value of a fact is that it helps complete a factual system, part of the terrain of truth. But if I were to ask what the value is of that truth, or even all truth if human knowledge could some day encompass all knowable facts, the answer would inevitably turn to other values, such as ‘good,’ ‘beautiful,’ or ‘useful.’ Just as the ‘value’ of one fact is that it fits into a greater array of facts that are non-contradictory, so the value of any one value, such as truth, is that it fits into a higher realm of values, each of which appraises and affirms the others. In other words, any value, including truth, always implies a grander whole. And, theologically speaking,



grander wholes always imply AL-LĀH, The Grandest and All-Embracing. He represents the intended End (Al-Ākhir) of all values, which finally and mutually affirm one another only in Him.

When we ask, therefore, which frame – scientistic materialism or GOD as The Ultimate Framer – should we choose, we are really asking, which type of frame enhances values, and which one demeans them? Which framing system takes ‘should’ to be a sign of GOD and which one ‘de-signifies’ it?

I do not intend by this to slight the necessary rigour and focus of the physical sciences. They have their place (i.e., their value) in a true conception of what knowledge is and does. There is nothing wrong, for example, in discovering the physical and chemical ‘laws’ that explain precipitation. Such an explanation is not only true but also beautiful and useful. It enhances our wonder at GOD’s craftsmanship, precision, foresight, and care. His deliberate and passionate involvement – creative, coordinating, life-sustaining, and benevolent – is what makes it true that He sends rain to us, regardless of the physical laws that merely explain its occurrence. It is true that rain is part of an ever-larger complex of interactions that stretch back to the original miracle of creation and the purposiveness that has manifested itself in everything since. All that and more is confirmed by common, unscientific truths such as that rain is good for life, meaningful for poets, and refreshing for children to splash about in.

Materialist framing claims to exclude GOD, for methodological reasons that have since become ideological. But Divine framing includes science. Actually, a properly scientific framing does not exclude GOD from existence but rather from what is physically observable. We have long known that we should not be looking for a big hand in the sky pouring water onto the earth. Rather He is The First Cause and Final Cause, both of which are beyond the scope of science, and is The One Who gives meaning to rain in terms of what purposes it serves and what it represents. Religious thinkers of the past may have misunderstood what ‘creation’ and ‘providence’ meant and unwittingly set up a conflict with modern science. But GOD properly understood is absolutely scientific. He breathes life and all our other values (not just fire) into the equations.

Let us be clear, then, about how facts and values are related, and in what respects they differ.

A fact is a particular form of truth in the realm of created being.

- 1) Facts are particular. Their ideal form is that of a simple statement about what a thing is or does.

- 2) Facts are derived from a value – truth – in a way that tends to insulate them from other values.
- 3) Facts represent the created end of the continuum of reality, and so are (mistakenly) conceived of as value-free.
- 4) Facts are created by GOD. They come into being by His Word; existence is loaned to them.
- 5) Facts are partial recipients of His Being; although dependent, they mimic His Independence.

A value, by contrast, is a positive or negative uncreated quale<sup>PP</sup> related to GOD's Own Being.

PP

I realize that 'quale' (the plural form being 'qualia') is generally regarded as an incommunicable property of experience only, not things or facts. But 1) we can regard experiences as things in their own right, or 2) we could argue that things or facts are nothing if not presented to us in the form of experiences.

I assert that values (e.g., 'good' or 'unreliable'), unlike created qualia (e.g., 'green' or 'massive'), are uncreated, that is, either representing GOD Himself, as absolutes do, or some degree of non-existence, or (as is always the case with things) a combination of both. Many qualia involve a mixture of created and uncreated aspects, as when we call something 'solid' by virtue not only of its physical properties but also of the approval that thing might attract from us.

The referents of this world, therefore, are neither all fact nor all value, but points or fields along a continuum that extends from the Ultimate Value (GOD) to the simplest equation or tiniest particle.

- 1) Values are general, multiform, and necessarily indistinct. They culminate, as absolutes, in GOD.
- 2) Values are derived from Him, and return to Him.
- 3) Values represent the uncreated end of the spectrum of reality, and so are (mistakenly) conceived of as fact-free. Rather facts and values are in constant contact across a porous, fuzzy border zone between the actual and the ideal. A fact is a value with roots; a value is a fact with wings.

- 4) Values are originally uncreated and timeless. They represent or express some aspect of Who GOD is (or is not).
- 5) Values are also partial, and without the Light of GOD can appear contradictory or incompatible in particular situations.

Darwin's theory of evolution has, by itself, a respectable intellectual pedigree and scientific method that deserve careful consideration by serious thinkers. Its scientistic offshoots, however, such as evolutionary ethics, have metastasized into something, for its most avid proponents, like a religion. The methodology of science, based on accuracy of measurement, reproducibility of results, and falsifiability, has been elevated into a multi-disciplinary critique whereby everything is either reducible to the facts of physics (or data) or else beyond the pale, (i.e., unreal or irrelevant). This is, of course, a frame that does not sustain itself, but rests on an unfounded faith in what 'everything' is, what constitutes 'facts,' what passes for 'truth,' and what counts for 'relevant.'

Many will argue that traditional religions have similar blind spots in their presupposed values, attachment to archaic glories, and reliance on unquestioning faith. They too are overreaching in their claims to truth, and merit similar scorn. How does the Qur'ān respond to this depiction of religion as a flawed, outdated product of wishful thinking, incompatible with the demands of today's rational, secular world?

## 35.

# THE VALUE OF RELIGION



In Chapter 25, I mentioned the Self/self as the interface between the unknowable subject (GOD or the individual spirit) and that same being ‘re-presented’ as an object. The Self/self is a *barzakh*, a connecting barrier, simultaneously uniting and dividing its two poles. It both posits and overcomes an illusory duality – illusory at the highest level, but nonetheless necessary if we are to speak of GOD or act in any way in this ‘lower’ phenomenal realm which the Qur’ān refers to as *ad-dunyā*.

In Chapter 12, I characterized faith as creative affirmation of that interface and the objects that sustain its imaginal world. Our imaginal world is held in place by frames (Chapter 21), conceptual membranes that consciously or unconsciously include various narratives (ours) and exclude others (theirs).

Religion has always been like another interface, namely that between our sense of self and our chosen frames. One such frame is what we call ‘reality.’ All religions claim to deal with reality in some form or another, and anyone who is concerned with reality is, knowingly or not, adopting a religious perspective. That, of course, goes against the narrow definition most commentators nowadays associate with religion. But people of the past, I would argue, understood religion in the wider sense represented by the word *dīn* in Arabic, and so naturally and correctly believed that everyone has a religion.<sup>99</sup>

By religion, therefore, I do not only mean one’s particular cult or sect, to be found in a church or temple. Rather it is the *dīn* of the Qur’ān – any system that offers comprehensive or absolute principles for ordering the lives and beliefs of individuals and their societies. By this account, Buddhism is a religion, but so too is the set of norms and expectations you find when you walk into your office at 9:00 in the morning. According to the early Buddhist texts, the Buddha did not advocate a belief in God or any supernatural entity, nor do you when you take off your coat and sit down at your computer with your first coffee of the day. Nonetheless, a *dīn* is

operating in both contexts, determining how the early Buddhists lived and how you will behave for the rest of your day until you return to your Buddhist, Jewish, or atheist home life, where another *dīn* is waiting for you.

When the Qur'ān simply refers to the faithful or those who believe, it almost always means those who are faithful to GOD or who believe in GOD. Continuing the analogy from Chapter 33, we could consider them to be those who are 'fit' for life with GOD (one of Whose Names is The Living). In the wider background, however, it is understood that every living being has some sort of belief or general 'fitness,' even if the object of belief is but a shadow of the truth.

QQ

**Q109:1–6** makes this abundantly clear. Not only do the *kāfirūn* (commonly translated as unbelievers or infidels) belong to one or another religion, but they also have objects of worship:

قُلْ يَا أَيُّهَا الْكَافِرُونَ  
لَا أَعْبُدُ مَا تَعْبُدُونَ  
وَلَا أَنْتُمْ عَابِدُونَ مَا أَعْبُدُ  
وَلَا أَنَا عَابِدٌ مَّا عَبَدْتُمْ  
وَلَا أَنْتُمْ عَابِدُونَ مَا أَعْبُدُ  
لَكُمْ دِينُكُمْ وَلِيَ دِينِ

Say, "O you who disbelieve! / I do not worship what you worship. / Neither are you worshippers of what I worship. / Nor am I a worshipper of what you worship. / Neither are you worshippers of what I worship. / Unto you is your religion; my religion is for me."

أَلَمْ تَرَ إِلَى الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا نَصِيبًا مِّنَ الْكِتَابِ يُؤْمِنُونَ بِالْجِبْتِ  
وَالتَّائِيَّاتِ وَيَقُولُونَ لِلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا هَؤُلَاءِ أَهْدَى مِنَ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا  
سَبِيلًا

**Have you not seen the ones who got a portion of the Book? They believe in idols and false deities and say of those who disbelieve, "They are better guided in their way than the believers." (Q4:51)**

In the same way, the Qur'ān recognizes religions other than the true or upright religion it espouses. And so we read, in **Q12:76**, how Yūsuf (peace be upon him) avoided relying on the **religion of the king** in whose lands he had a vital role:

مَا كَانَ لِيَأْخُذَ أَخَاهُ فِي دِينِ الْمَلِكِ إِلَّا أَنْ يَشَاءَ اللَّهُ

**It was not fitting for him to detain his brother by the king's religious law unless GOD willed it so.**

In ancient times, religion and law were one system, (i.e., a *dīn*).

هُوَ الَّذِي أَرْسَلَ رَسُولَهُ بِالْهُدَىٰ وَدِينِ الْحَقِّ لِيُظْهِرَهُ عَلَى الدِّينِ كُلِّهِ  
وَلَوْ كَرِهَ الْمُشْرِكُونَ

**He it is Who sent His Messenger with Guidance and the True Religion that it might prevail over all religions, though the polytheists hate it. (Q9:33)**

Nonetheless, when we read in *Sūrah* 1 of the Qur'ān, or The Opening, **Owner of the Day of Judgement [or Religion] (māliki yaumid-dīn) (Q1:4)**, we are being warned of a Day when we encounter not just any religion, nor all religions, but The Religion, which will constitute the basis of Judgement for all creation and the gateway to Divine Reality.

Until then, our practical reality is that of dealing with religions that appear limited, flawed, unrealistic, or outdated. **Truly the religion with AL-LĀH is Al-Islām [Submission] (Q3:19)**, but in the meantime we feel as if we are on our own, faced with a set of institutions, attitudes, and practices that constitute a problem for rational believers, to put it mildly. Given how feebly today's religious milieux reflect the Qur'ān's **religion with AL-LĀH**, what value is there in participating in religion at all? Does the advocacy of **True Religion** have any relevance for us in this age?

In Chapter 18, I explored the Verse of Light (**Q24:35**) and what it signified for our understanding of faith and religion. I suggested that faith burns brightest when it has a glass (religion) protecting it from the sudden drafts of news, fashions, and passions. That glass, however, can be darkened by those same external currents, and also by impurities produced in burning, from the oil that feeds the flame.

Now, through the discussion of facts and values in Chapter 34, we can gain a clearer sense of how religion and faith are related. Just as our values cannot be explained or confined by the facts of evolution, so also does faith precede and exceed the concrete boundaries of religion. The flame seems to live within the limits of the glass, just as each value appears to be bound by human or biological history, but actually both faith and value have some sort of greater pre-existence and a broader influence as well. Faith explains why religion was brought down to earth, as it were, and facts are continuously sent down, like rain, as particular instantiations of a timeless value, truth, the source of which is GOD Himself.

Faith is the Light of GOD in this world, and religion is the medium that not only protects that light but also transmits it – almost perfectly if it is clear, and less so as it becomes compromised by its material conditions. We could say, then, that faith expresses the ideal, while religion, as its vehicle, seeks to reify that ideal in the realm of the possible. The brightest values, likewise, however pure in reality, can appear darkened by the passage of time, doubtful or dying behind the shattering of religion’s glass, or even extinguished by the winds of a world obsessed with facts. Only those who look within, in the light of their own strong flame, can see that actually nothing has been lost.

The flame of faith fascinates us with its unworldly dancing, its space-piercing glow, and its upward striving, but for us it lives, nonetheless, in a worldly setting – supported by the lamp’s body, fed by the oil of the inspired intellect, and seemingly surrounded by the glass of religion. That glass is both protective and constraining; it is a recognition that faith and the world are in a state of tension, of mutual wariness. The dark gales of the world can extinguish faith, and a rampaging faith could convert the world to ashes. A balance or compromise must be fashioned; like glass, that compromise is delicate, hard to see, and easily tarnished.

It should be remembered also that religion is designed to deal with men and women in two conditions: as they are and as they should be. It walks a tenuous line between the timeless values that faith aims to recreate in human hearts and the space- and time-bound concerns and experiences of each new generation. There are elements of any religion, therefore, that must never change, and other elements that must be flexible and open to renewal. Only GOD can make the fine and final decision on where that line is to be drawn. To understand it, we need some sense of how His Messenger (may GOD bless him and give him peace) dealt with the practical issue of maintaining a balance between faith’s demands and the worldly reality of people’s varying temperaments and capacities.

عَنْ أَبِي هُرَيْرَةَ قَالَ قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ إِنَّ هَذَا الدِّينَ يُسْرٌ وَلَنْ يُشَادَّ الدِّينَ أَحَدٌ إِلَّا غَلَبَهُ فَسَدِّدُوا وَقَارِبُوا وَأَبْشِرُوا وَيَسِّرُوا وَاسْتَعِينُوا بِالْعَدْوَةِ وَالرَّوْحَةِ وَشَيْءٍ مِنَ الدَّلْجَةِ

*From Abī Hurairah, who reported that the Messenger of AL-LĀH (may GOD bless him and give him peace) said, “This religion is easy, and no one makes it harder but is defeated by it. So take aim and draw near, give good tidings and make things easy, and seek help in the morning and the evening and a little of the night.”*

*(Sunanun-Nasā’ī, Book 47, Ḥadīth 50)*

أَنَّهُ سَمِعَ طَلْحَةَ بْنَ عُبَيْدِ اللَّهِ يَقُولُ جَاءَ رَجُلٌ إِلَى رَسُولِ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ مِنْ أَهْلِ نَجْدٍ ثَائِرِ الرَّأْسِ يُسْمَعُ دَوِيُّ صَوْتِهِ وَلَا يُفْهَمُ مَا يَقُولُ حَتَّى دَنَا فَإِذَا هُوَ يَسْأَلُ عَنِ الْإِسْلَامِ قَالَ لَهُ رَسُولُ خَمْسٍ صَلَوَاتٍ فِي الْيَوْمِ وَاللَّيْلَةِ قَالَ هَلْ عَلَيَّ غَيْرُهُنَّ قَالَ لَا إِلَّا أَنْ تَطَوَّعَ قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ وَصِيَامُ شَهْرِ رَمَضَانَ قَالَ هَلْ عَلَيَّ غَيْرُهُ قَالَ لَا إِلَّا أَنْ تَطَوَّعَ وَذَكَرَ لَهُ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ الزَّكَاةَ فَقَالَ هَلْ عَلَيَّ غَيْرُهَا قَالَ لَا إِلَّا أَنْ تَطَوَّعَ فَأَذْبَرَ الرَّجُلُ وَهُوَ يَقُولُ لَا أُرِيدُ عَلَى هَذَا وَلَا أَنْقُصُ مِنْهُ فَقَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ أَفْلَحَ إِنْ صَدَقَ

*[The narrator] heard Ṭalḥatab-na ‘Ubaidil-Lāhi say, “A man came to the Messenger of AL-LĀH (may GOD bless him and give him peace) from the people of Najd. His hair was unkempt, and his voice was loud, but what he was saying could not be grasped until he was near. Then he asked about Islam. The Messenger [of AL-LĀH] said, ‘Five ritual prayers by day and night.’ He asked, ‘Am I obliged to do more than that?’ He replied, ‘No, unless you do so willingly.’ Then the Messenger of GOD said, ‘And fasting in the month of Ramaḍān.’ He asked, ‘Am I obliged to do more than that?’ He replied, ‘No, unless you do so willingly.’ Then the Messenger of AL-LĀH mentioned the alms-tax. He asked, ‘Am I obliged to do more than that?’ He replied, ‘No, unless you do so willingly.’ Then the man turned to go, saying, ‘I will not add to this nor subtract from it.’ And the Messenger of AL-LĀH (may GOD bless him and give him peace) said, ‘He has succeeded if he has told the truth.’”*  
*(Sunanun-Nasā’ī, Book 47, Ḥadīth 44)*

We learn from these two traditions that religion (i.e., Islam in this case) has a range and flexibility suitable to its role as an interface or medium between the demands of faith and the realities of the world and human nature. On the one hand, it allows us to *take aim and draw near* to heavenly realities beyond our ken – the realm of faith. On the other hand, it understands and sympathizes with the failings and weaknesses of someone who is always asking, ‘*Am I obliged to do more than that?*’ The answer should be reassuring in its concreteness – ‘Do just this much’ – and intriguing in what is always implied – ‘Do more if you can.’ The dual role of religion is to set comfortable or cognizable limits, like those of the body, and to invite to what is limitless, where the spirit can soar and explore.

A religion that is intact, vibrant, and relevant is able to keep these two elements mutually suspended and supportive, like day and night or heaven



and earth. When we tend to either extreme, which occurs too often nowadays with literalistic orthodoxy on the one hand and unconventional ‘New Age’-type spirituality on the other, the golden mean of the intact middle ground falls apart. The result is a rigid traditionalist remnant on one side and an undisciplined, meandering fringe on the other. And then the question – ‘Is religion relevant?’ – does itself become relevant.

The relevance that most people seek, almost reflexively, is conformity to the established materialistic world view. Modern criticisms of religion generally therefore tend to focus on what religions say as statements of fact. Does GOD exist? Is heaven a real place? Are there objective moral rules? Do the stories of the Qur’ān or the Bible tally with the latest scientific accounts? In other words, does religion fit within our (greater) frame? One verse that indirectly addresses this line of questioning is Q2:259:

أَوْ كَالَّذِي مَرَّ عَلَى قَرْيَةٍ وَهِيَ خَاوِيَةٌ عَلَى عُرُوشِهَا قَالَ أَنَّى  
يُحْيِي هَذِهِ اللَّهُ بَعْدَ مَوْتِهَا فَأَمَاتَهُ اللَّهُ مِائَةَ عَامٍ ثُمَّ بَعَثَهُ قَالَ كَمْ  
لَبِثْتَ قَالَ لَبِثْتُ يَوْمًا أَوْ بَعْضَ يَوْمٍ قَالَ بَلْ لَبِثْتَ مِائَةَ عَامٍ  
فَانْظُرْ إِلَى طَعَامِكَ وَشَرَابِكَ لَمْ يَتَسَنَّهْ وَانْظُرْ إِلَى جِمَاركَ  
وَلِنَجْعَلَكَ آيَةً لِلنَّاسِ وَانْظُرْ إِلَى الْعِظَامِ كَيْفَ نُنشِزُهَا ثُمَّ  
نَكْسُوهَا لَحْمًا فَلَمَّا تَبَيَّنَ لَهُ قَالَ أَعْلَمُ أَنَّ اللَّهَ عَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ  
قَدِيرٌ

Or [what about] the one who passed a settlement in ruins, saying, “How could GOD give life to this place following its death?” So GOD left him for dead a hundred years and subsequently resurrected him. He asked, “How long have you been gone?” He said, “I was delayed a day or fraction of a day.” He answered, “Rather you have tarried for a hundred years. See your food and drink that have not spoiled, yet see [that nothing of] your donkey [has remained but bones], and so that We might make of you a sign for people, look [again] upon the bones, how We arrange them, and then cover them with flesh.” When it became apparent to him, he exclaimed, “[Now] I know that GOD has power over everything.”

Some of the ancient commentators cited by Ibnī Kathīr believe that **the one who passed** was Khidr, the same **servant from among Our servants (Q18:65)** mentioned in Chapter 14 of this book who became a spiritual guide for Mūsā (peace be upon him). But in our day, a person who asks this kind of question would likely assume that God could not give life

**to this place following its death.** Rather his mental vision would be blocked by the large, opaque, and seemingly solid and impenetrable structure that we take science with its mass of facts to be. A demonstration of how a donkey is wholly resurrected from bare bones, as mentioned in the above verse, would be wasted on him, as per this passage:

وَلَوْ فَتَحْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ بَابًا مِّنَ السَّمَاءِ فَظَلُّوا فِيهِ يَعْرُجُونَ  
لَقَالُوا إِنَّمَا سُكِّرَتْ أَبْصَارُنَا بَلْ نَحْنُ قَوْمٌ مَّسْحُورُونَ

**If We had opened up for them a gate from heaven, so they could go on ascending through it, / They would say, “We are bedazzled; no, we are a people who have been bewitched.” (Q15:14–15)**

By insulating **the one who passed**, along with his food and drink, from the ordinary passage of time, and then effectively reversing time by bringing his donkey back to life, GOD revealed what His servant should have known from the start – that the so-called laws of nature, such as the second law of thermodynamics, are merely *sunnatul-LĀH*, GOD’s customary way of doing things, regularities that can bedazzle and bewitch us into thinking that they are our rulers and not just temporary rules. We do, of course, need regularity and predictability to function reliably, efficiently, and meaningfully within this realm of entropy, facts, and figures, and so the world has an order and consistency that conforms to our own constitution.

يَا أَيُّهَا الْإِنْسَانُ مَا غَرَّكَ بِرَبِّكَ الْكَرِيمِ  
الَّذِي خَلَقَكَ فَسَوَّاكَ فَعَدَلَكَ  
فِي أَيِّ صُورَةٍ مَا شَاءَ رَكَّبَكَ  
كَلَّا بَلْ تُكَذِّبُونَ بِالذِّينِ

**O mankind! What has beguiled you regarding your Distinguished Lord? / The One Who made you, then He gave you order, then He equalized you – / In whatever form He wished He constituted you. / But no! you still deny the Law of Faith! (Q82:6-9)**

When we take these provisional frames of intentional regularity to be picture frames hanging on solid walls, rather than window frames in which we can see the spiritual landscape stretching out in all directions past the bounds of space and time, we become trapped and isolated inside the constructs of our own minds and begin to **deny** what is going on beyond.

This mentality of favouring solid facts over expansive views corresponds, according to Iain McGilchrist in *The Master and His Emissary*, to the brain's left hemisphere with its naïve rationality dominating the more intuitive, open-minded outlook of the right hemisphere:

[I]t prioritises the system, regardless of experience; it stays within the system of signs. Truth, for it, is coherence, because for it there is no world beyond, no Other, nothing outside the mind, to correspond with. ... For the right hemisphere, truth is not mere coherence, but correspondence with something other than itself. Truth, for it, is understood in the sense of being 'true' to something, faithfulness to whatever it is that exists apart from ourselves.<sup>18</sup>

In this house of the fact-filled mind, therefore, religion provides the panes of glass, and faith is the willingness to look, not merely at the patterns on them, but further, into the heavenly scenes beyond. When those panes are clean and wide, they are not only moral or spiritual but also practical; they show us where we came from (the Kingdom of GOD), where we are headed (back to Him), and what the road there looks like. Yes, those panes are mostly ready-made, (i.e., given by revelation or tradition), but they offer enough scope for everyone to have his or her own particular outlook. If we choose to manufacture our own glass, we are at liberty to do so, but the final product will not only be 'from scratch' but itself scratched and diminished by our peculiar idiosyncrasies and failings, and in the end will give us nothing more than the same view we could have had from the start – and for free. Why try to elbow the prophets and messengers of GOD away from your little did-it-yourself square inch of glass, when you can borrow their spectacles, so graciously bestowed to every succeeding generation, and see how far you can emulate their gaze?

Through religion, we come to know that, besides the worldly facts that occupy so much of our attention and our schools' curricula, there are heavenly facts that defy our attempts to describe or circumvent them. If we define facts as objective truths concerning which there is a broad consensus, then the values we use to identify facts, such as coherence, consistency, reliability, and relevance, are in some sense also factual. Universal beliefs such as justice being better than injustice, or peace and harmony being preferable to violence and disorder, are harbingers and messengers

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<sup>18</sup> McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary*, page 193.

of a celestial dimension where measurement gives way to instant recognition and consent. Religion trains us to honour and prioritize these higher, eternal facts.

Where am I now? Where am I going? Where should I be going, and how do I get there? These are practical – no, urgent – questions, and most of us have much less than one lifetime to get them answered. As I mentioned in the Prologue, the debates are endless, and time is short. Religion is the travel package that sets us on our feet, dusts us off, and pushes us out the door and on our way with the least hesitation and the greatest expertise.

Why, then, is the modern physicalist narrative so compelling and attractive, despite its lack of a transcendent perspective and a potentially fatal deficit of long-term practicality? Why are we so inclined to take scientism as the gospel of reality?

## 36.

# UNDER THE STREET LAMP



In the traditional folk tales of Central Asia, we find a collection of witty and whimsical teachings that all rely upon a central figure whose foibles and follies reveal an inexhaustible well of wisdom. I am referring, of course, to the fictional character of Naşrud-Dîn, on whom are hung a great variety of humorous and profound anecdotes revealing the state of humanity in all its absurdity. Here is one that perfectly captures our modern condition:

A man was going home one night when he saw Naşrud-Dîn bent over and shuffling around a lamp post. "Did you lose something?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Naşrud-Dîn. "My ring."

Being a good friend and neighbour, the passerby joined in the quest, poking in the sand and dirt and squinting as he tried to locate the lost item.

After several minutes of fruitless searching, the man straightened up and asked, "Tell me – where exactly do you think it fell?"

"Just outside my house," said Naşrud-Dîn. "But the light here is so much better."

This story has the ring of truth to it because it so succinctly illustrates the wishful thinking that underlies the professional pursuit of knowledge. We investigate what is clear and easy for us, and then filter out the dark, vague, distant, and immeasurable as unworthy of our search. In this way, knowledge becomes a matter of what we see rather than what is there. (Rolf Dobelli in *The Art of Thinking Clearly* has termed this the "availability bias."<sup>19</sup>) And that, in short, is what makes materialism so irresistibly popular. The lost ring – the initial reason for our quest – is soon forgotten,

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<sup>19</sup> Dobelli, *The Art of Thinking Clearly*, p. 31.

and consequently every glint and sparkle from the dirt directly under the lamp becomes a discovery and a vindication.

The Qur'ān has its own way of expressing this all-so-human tendency to reduce reality to visibility.

أَفَرَأَيْتَ مَنْ اتَّخَذَ إِلَهَهُ هَوَاهُ وَأَضَلَّهُ اللَّهُ عَلَى عِلْمٍ

**Have you seen the one who took his god to be his wishes, whereas GOD by knowledge let him go astray? (Q45:23)**

In English, we would say “made his wishes his god,” reversing the Qur’ānic order of “god” and “wishes,” just as we would mention what we think is near before what we believe is further off in saying “make his dreams come true” or “make money his goal in life.” But in the Qur’ān, a god is always the one closest to the self, either as his lord or his alter ego; we fail to recognize GOD by associating Him with something that is actually more distant, even if we hold it as dear to us as our own desires. In the same way, the lost ring of truth is “just outside” our home, but we associate it with the light in the street because we want it to be there, where the search is easy and the results are clear.

لَا يُخْلِفُ اللَّهُ وَعْدَهُ وَلَكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ النَّاسِ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ  
يَعْلَمُونَ ظَاهِرًا مِّنَ الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا وَهُمْ عَنِ الْآخِرَةِ هُمْ غَافِلُونَ

**AL-LĀH does not forsake His promise, but the mass of mankind does not know – / They know the outward show of worldly life but of the Everafter they are heedless. (Q30:6–7)**

Matter is the epitome of outward show, what we see and think of first when we speak of feminine beauty (the skin, the hair, the figure), masculine power symbols (the house, the car, the mass of soldiers), or simple reality (like Samuel Johnson kicking a stone to disprove Berkeley’s idealism – “I refute it thus!”). What we truly value is the beauty, the power, or the reality, all of which are immaterial and immeasurable, but because we cannot see them under the lamp of our short-sighted minds, we take their material surfaces as adequate substitutes. And thus is scientism born.

Materialism or physicalism is the default version of reality nowadays because it offers everything we want reality to have: simplicity; clarity; a consistent structure of interlocking hypotheses; a claim that it explains everything we see, hear, or feel; falsifiability (implicitly valuing the provable over the unprovable); an alliance with the prestige of science; a narrative of past progress; a prospect of future greatness; a justification for

moral relativism or the irrelevance of morals; and a wide-open ethical vacuum for exploitative capitalism to expand into.

I am not denying the explanatory power and beauty of physicalism within its proper domain. But we need to realize that when people say, as so many do nowadays, that ‘I believe in science,’ they are accepting the encroachment of materialism into their lives, minds, and spirits quite some way outside of that proper domain. How has that happened?<sup>20</sup>

Typical phenomena in the physical world can be portrayed as chains of simple action–reaction events. Apply heat, for example, to ice, and it melts. These reactions are entirely predictable, based on our (adequate) knowledge of what water is and how it behaves in various conditions.

With organisms the same paradigm can be observed, but with greater complexity. The basic format is one of stimulus and response. Apply heat to an amoeba, and we can observe one of several possible responses, depending on the environment and its internal state. These responses are almost entirely predictable, based on our (probably adequate) knowledge of what an amoeba is and how it behaves in various conditions. The amoeba presumably has a signalling system that sorts out what kind of stimulus is being applied and what response is appropriate, given all the other factors in play.

The more complex the organism, the greater the range of possible responses. Apply heat to a dog and ... there may be too many variables to calculate. We can make some plausible predictions, but the level of certainty is now only probable (and probably inadequate).

Apply heat to a human being, and the first question will be, ‘What do you even mean by that?’ The frame is indefinite, and the range of possibilities and interpretations is so great as to render prediction useless. Nor can we begin to fathom the complexity of signals involved when we obtain a vast and contradictory field of results. Clearly, a method and framework that function perfectly or quite well in the physical or simple biological realm become irrelevant or ludicrous when blindly applied to fields beyond their proper range.

Still, despite all this incalculable, incomprehensible data, the physicalist will insist that a measurable physical stimulus produces a measurable physical response. Man is a machine, albeit incredibly intricate in its workings, and the physicalist frame remains intact. Evolution can proceed by environmental cues and random mutations to produce, somehow, the

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<sup>20</sup> See the Prologue in Sheldrake, *Science Set Free*, for a brief summary.

whole range of human behaviour ... theoretically, at least. While the process may never be known, physicalism asserts that it is knowable. All we need to function as a human machine is a system of digital signals, like commands in a computer program. Nature is quite capable of the complex administration of signals necessary for us to survive, as is evident in animals and in our own reflex reactions and pre-conscious responses to sudden events.

Ultimately, then, according to the physicalists, every event, including the contents of our lives and our brains, is reducible to an action–reaction paradigm, which can subsequently be explained in terms of particle physics and the fundamental ‘laws of nature.’ This version of reality remains the dominant lamp on the streets and in the schools where we are forming the minds of future generations.

But when we confine our investments and investigations to this small circle of enquiry, what is motivating us? The ring we lost – the ring of truth. Is it there, in the laboratory, the observatory, or the algorithm? No – we get nothing but the occasional gleam from the hard particles that surround that particular lamp post. At best, we obtain a panoramic view of the entire lamplit circle where we are standing. But why are we standing there? We claim to be searching for the truth, but secretly we know that it is somewhere else, and definitely not where our senses work best and our intellects love to shine. We wishfully think that somehow, someday, the darkness will be dispelled by some amazing technical singularity or logical deduction from those scintillas that lie within the range of our materialist vision, but meanwhile we live, love, age, and die ... in darkness.

Or so we have come to consider it. But if we were to come home to ourselves, we would soon find another kind of light, and plenty of clues to where the ring of truth is to be found. That blush of unspeakable delight at the beauty of a sunset. That thrill of gratitude upon receiving a valuable gift from a valued friend. The sheer amazement of realizing the unfathomable immensity of the universe, and appreciating the intricate detail in every one of its tiniest particles. That sudden swell of emotion upon hearing a particular phrase or motif in a song or symphony. Some people – a hardened few, mostly rare (thank goodness) – claim to get no special pleasure from any of these. But as for those who do – why all this useless, intangible joy? Why so many evolutionary dead ends? Are they spandrels, accidental by-products of our otherwise efficient signalling system? Or do we misconceive them by looking for nothing more than their material utility? In other words, why is mere mechanical Nature so non-parsimonious, so unshaven by Occam’s razor when it comes to humans?



There is a 'raw feel' element of our subjective experience that is both undeniable and incompatible with a strictly physicalist paradigm of reality. Yet if we try to conceptualize it, to pin down and name 'it,' it is no longer subjective but an object, a memory, and so amenable to systematization. The enemy of the physicalist system is not complexity, but the pure simplicity of that felt moment which then becomes a memory. The physicalist system pounces on that datum, and waves away the ineffable experience before it – an instant that to elucidate is to betray.

There is a difference here between map and territory. No physicalist would deny that he is offering only a map. What he cannot offer is a sense of territory, namely the experiential instant before we attempt to say what 'it' is. 'Something' is there before the act of attention 'names' it. To name it is to identify it, to interpret it, and to objectify it. In the same way that physicalism posits something real being present before our maps objectify it, consciousness encounters something present before our ability to identify it.

Some physicalists have tried to explain experiences as merely part of the factual map, but that is a category error. They are not the same. Facts are 'about' experiences; they interpret them. But the experience itself, before we objectify it, is both unique and undeniable. Experiences are more than mere facts because facts are what we argue over; there is nothing arguable about experiences (as long as we do not try to explain or identify them). They open up into a higher, unseen dimension.

Some philosophers have tried to explain what is irreducible and unique about experience, and the physicalists can always respond by attacking its lack of objectivity. And that is precisely the point. It is not objective; it cannot be 'proven.' We are certain, but we cannot say how. We are, in our innermost being, face to face with the same dilemma we have when discussing GOD. This is **the nature of AL-LĀH by which He made humanity (Q30:30).**

Science depends on numbers and measurement. But the concepts it uses cannot be measured. There is no way to inductively derive the concept 'star' from the equations that describe a star. Rather our concept came first, and the calculations come in afterward to break it down, like maggots around a corpse. Science cannot proceed without such concepts, while our daily lives have been getting along just fine for thousands or millions of years without the precision of science. So which is primary and which is derived? Which is necessary and which is expendable? Which expresses GOD (The Absolute) and which expresses His creation (dependent)?

Physicalism tells us that physical things, (i.e., matter / energy), came first, but the assertion itself is not material. Informational realism (referring back to Text Box Y in Chapter 22) declares that information came first, but such a statement is not reducible to purely digital information. What is ‘information’ as a concept in an informational system? Just like ‘materialism,’ it can reduce everything to its frame but itself.

The ring of truth still lurks in the back of our minds, that uncanny source of our concepts, our values, our experiences, and our very subjectivity. We think we can find it under the street lamp, but that circle on the ground is altogether too small, and too dependent on things outside its delusively bright ambit. We are seeking – we need – an Absolute, Infinite, Self-Subsistent Frame / Framer – The One Who forged His link to us and left it *thoughtfully where we are not wont to look*.

We need GOD.

## THE ACTIVE INTELLECT – ITS FORCE AND STYLE



Like Naṣrid-Dīn, we tend to look at things where or in the way we want to see them, which makes alternative points of view appear strange, abstract, or meaningless. For modern Western materialism, there is hardly any text that is more ‘alternative’ than the Qur’ān. So entrenched are we, even more so than its first readers, in our comfortable physicalist view of reality that we can only be lured out of our trenches by the indirect device of metaphor. Plain exposition, which is abundant and repetitive in the Qur’ān, generally meets with resistance. Its symbolic passages, on the other hand, are like the **goodly tree** – connecting familiar or concrete images from our experience or literature with ideas that can only be seen growing on the uppermost boughs of our intellectual imagination.

أَلَمْ تَرَىٰ كَيْفَ ضَرَبَ اللَّهُ مَثَلًا كَلِمَةً طَيِّبَةً كَشَجَرَةٍ طَيِّبَةٍ أَصْلُهَا ثَابِتٌ  
وَفَرْعُهَا فِي السَّمَاءِ

**Do you not see how GOD presents a simile? A goodly word is like a goodly tree; its roots are stable and its branches reach the sky. (Q14:24)**

One of the most memorable passages of this type is in the 27th *Sūrah*, or *Sūratil-Naml*. *Naml* means “Ants.” We may never get more than an ant’s-eye view of what AL-LĀH means by power, knowledge, and guidance in these verses (Q27:15–44). Still, it is worth a try if we believe, as I do, that such anecdotes in the Qur’ān are there for more than just to tell a story.

(Q27:15)

وَلَقَدْ آتَيْنَا دَاوُودَ وَسُلَيْمَانَ عِلْمًا وَقَالَا الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ الَّذِي فَضَّلَنَا عَلَىٰ  
كَثِيرٍ مِّنْ عِبَادِهِ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ

**Certainly We granted knowledge to Dāwūd and Sulaimān, and they said, “Praise is due to GOD, Who gave us excellences over many of His faithful slaves.”**

The expression, ‘Knowledge is power,’ is about to be turned inside out – using symbols of power to reveal what real knowledge is. With the first appearance of Dāwūd (peace be upon him) in the Qur’ān (Q2:251) his power is mentioned in passing, and more as a means to something greater:

وَأَتَاهُ اللَّهُ الْمُلْكَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ وَعَلَّمَهُ مِمَّا يَشَاءُ

**And GOD bestowed upon him kingship and sagacity and taught him some of what He willed.**

The Qur’ān’s stories about Dāwūd and Sulaimān (peace be upon them) are not meant to display their worldly power, which is of no use to us now, but their wisdom and knowledge, excellences that can light our way today as they did for them then. And their first lesson, the highest achievement of their learning, is here in the first line – **Praise is due to GOD**. All their sagacity ultimately serves no nobler purpose than to magnify AL-LĀH, from Whom all intellectual gifts come. By fervently worshipping GOD, The True Proprietor of all excellences, the ordinary believer achieves in his own small way as much as the greatest prophets achieved in theirs.

(16)

وَوَرِثَ سُلَيْمَانُ دَاوُودَ وَقَالَ يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ عَلَّمْنَا مَنَظِقَ الطَّيْرِ وَأَوْتَيْنَا مِنْ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ إِنَّ هَذَا لَهُوَ الْفَضْلُ الْمُبِينُ

**And Sulaimān, who was the heir of Dāwūd, said, “O People! we have been instructed in the speech of birds and given some of everything. Indeed this is illuminating favour.”**

The symbolism of this thirty-verse passage – which is not to deny or minimize its literal import – begins here. What is the significance of **birds** in general, and particularly **the speech of birds**? How is it related to being **given some of everything**? And how is this the clearest **favour**?

— Birds are remarkably potent symbols in the Qur’ān. They are first mentioned (Q2:260) when Ibrāhīm (peace be upon him) asks to see (**Show me**) how AL-LĀH revives the dead. After the demonstration, AL-LĀH says: Know that GOD is **Mighty, Wise**. ‘Isā (peace be upon

him) uses a bird made from clay as a **sign (Q3:49)** to illustrate GOD's power to infuse dead matter with life. The ancient rituals of augury or ornithomancy, by which pagan priests claimed to foretell the future from the flight, cries, or feeding patterns of birds, are mentioned (and implicitly condemned, e.g., in **Q36:18**). **Do you not see (Q24:41)**, we are asked, how their singing, like everyone in heaven and earth, glorifies AL-LĀH? And of particular significance is this verse (**Q67:19**):

أَوَلَمْ يَرَوْا إِلَى الطَّيْرِ فَوْقَهُمْ صَاقَاتٍ وَيَقْبِضْنَ مَا يُمَسِّكُهُنَّ إِلَّا  
الرَّحْمَنُ إِنَّهُ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ بَصِيرٌ

**Have they not seen the birds above them spreading out their wings and folding them? No one holds them but The Gracious. Truly He is Seer of all things.**

Not only are we encouraged to look up and notice the flight of birds, but also to see them as GOD sees them, up close – as if they live and move in the palm of His Hand.

— The leading figurative association of birds in the Qur'ān is with sight, followed by connections to knowledge, life-giving powers, and praise. Birds, then, represent an invigorating wisdom, a knowledge of the visible realm that can, by speech, be rendered audible as well. Consider them as the symbol by which the singular, instantaneous certainty of sight mentioned in Chapter 3 of this book is articulated in a slower, more extended medium, namely sound. Whatever space-conquering insight I may have in mind, I need gradual, linear time and the clumsy but enchanting mechanism of words (or birdsong) to lay it out for you. This is why the speech of Sulaimān alone (peace be upon him) begins by addressing his subjects – **O people**; the knowledge GOD gave him in one medium is to be conveyed for mankind's benefit through another medium. And with such wide-ranging sight and clear means of communication at his disposal, he has, in effect, **some of everything**. It is by this **illuminating favour** that he has obtained the right to rule and the power to command – sparks that leap out from the Light of The Lord Most Powerful.

— The emphasis on sight is reinforced at many points in this thirty-verse passage: **Why do I not see the hoopoe? (Q27:20)**; **We shall see if you are truthful (Q27:27)**; **see what they respond with (Q27:28)**;

**Consider** (literally **See**) **what you will command** (Q27:33); **seeing what the messengers will bring as a reply** (Q27:35); **in the blink of an eye** (literally **before your glance comes back to you**) (Q27:40); **we shall see if she is rightly guided** (Q27:41); and **when she looked, she thought she saw a pool** (Q27:44).

(17)

وَحُشِرَ لِسُلَيْمَانَ جُنُودُهُ مِنَ الْجِنِّ وَالْإِنسِ وَالطَّيْرِ فَهُمْ يُوزَعُونَ

**To Sulaimān were mobilized in groups his forces of the *jinn*, mankind, and birds, for each a rank and order.**

For a man of GOD, his knowledge is not something he simply gets or acquires; he inherits it from those before him and finds it gathered together for him by a power not his own. Command of it is entrusted to him, so in common parlance we may say that the knowledge is his. But what we are actually seeing in this passage is a metaphor for how true knowledge works with anyone when it is informed by the Knowledge of GOD and granted by His Will. It is a force, or rather an integrated collection of forces, which is organized, mobile, and spiritually transformative.

The *jinn* are mentioned as the first force. How are we to understand their symbolic significance, their character, and their role?

— The *jinn* were created from fire prior to the creation of man (Q15:27). Iblīs was one of them, hence their association with the diabolical and demonic. The triadic root for *jinn* – *j* – *n* – *n* (*jīm* – *nūn* – *nūn*) – is the same as that for insane, namely possessed by *jinn*. They are rarely seen by man, but have names, tribes, and various dispositions – good and bad, believing and rejecting – analogous to humans (Q72:11, 14), and are frequently addressed in the Qur’ān along with mankind. Just as the birds are distinguished by their sight, so do the *jinn* have a propensity for hearing (Q72:9). They were employed by Sulaimān (peace be upon him) in various practical fields – diving (for pearls) (Q21:82), construction, and metal-working (Q34:13). They were his engineers and technicians, befitting a group whose primary association is with fire.

— There are no salient connotations for mankind here, possibly because, as the middle element, humanity includes or has access to both the practical characteristics of the *jinn* on the one hand and the vision-

ary qualities of the birds on the other. The concept of man as microcosm, as the epitome of all creation, has strong support in many religious and philosophical traditions, and is suggested through the many Qur'ānic verses in which even the angels are commanded to show their respect for him by prostrating to Ādam (peace be upon him). One might say that, through Sulaimān (peace be upon him), the human element represents the central importance of a relationship to GOD in the multi-dimensional campaign of pursuing knowledge.

— What are those dimensions? Clearly they are three in number, symbolized by **the *jinn*, mankind, and birds**.

- 1) The *jinn* represent the task-oriented, technical, and systemic aspects of knowledge, obsessed – even to the point of madness or malice – with amplifying, clarifying, and applying what has been obtained. They dive into their subject, calculating, crafting, devising, and dividing. In this work of mine, they sort my sentences, shape my stanzas, and sharpen my style. The *jinn* are the real engine in today's marketing and technology, for their specialty is know-how.
- 2) Birds are the search-oriented, data-driven, and communicative aspects of knowledge, forever fascinated with distances, novelties, and whatever can be snatched up and brought back to the nest. No flight of fancy or sky-scraping vista is too far for them. In this work, they explore new horizons of thought, hovering or wandering wherever inspiration leads them. When left unchecked, they tend to be explicit and scornful of boundaries in the cause of know-what.
- 3) Finally, coordinating these two and mediating between their contrasting tendencies is the essentially human capacity for bearing the message (**Q33:72**), understanding it (**Q21:79**), and implementing it by a higher form of knowledge, namely wisdom or good judgement. (McGilchrist's left – *jinn*-like – and right – bird-like – hemispheres of the brain require a non-physical unifying principle.) This is the intellect's true sphere of activity – concentrating, organizing, and commanding the forces granted to it, and, most importantly, glorifying The Superior Intellect Who keeps it in Mind. It is this element – which we could term know-why – that is sadly missing in this crippled age of extremism, imbalance, and sheer ignorance of Who GOD is. And without that, this book would never have been written.

(18)

حَتَّىٰ إِذَا أَتَوْا عَلَىٰ وَادِي النَّمْلِ قَالَتْ نَمْلَةٌ يَا أَيُّهَا النَّمْلُ ادْخُلُوا  
مَسَاكِنَكُمْ لَا يَحْطِمَنَّكُمْ سُلَيْمَانُ وَجُنُودُهُ وَهُمْ لَا يَشْعُرُونَ

Then when they came upon the Valley of the Ants, an ant exclaimed, “O Ants! Take shelter in your homes lest you be crushed by Sulaimān and by his troops while they are unaware.”

Ants represent the acme of insect organization; they are certainly among the **forces** of **rank** and **order** in the animal world. They therefore offer an instructive contrast to the weighty metaphor of Sulaimān (peace be upon him) and his army. While his knowledge moves within a vast multidimensional domain, they occupy a valley, and can only guess at what the world is or has by how it affects them. Their understanding is necessarily as small as their horizons, and so fragile that safety is their overriding concern. And experience has taught them that the world above and beyond that of their daily chores is of no use to them, and positively dangerous.

This, of course, is the perspective of the common folk – of all races and epochs – who have no knowledge other than what revolves around their own minuscule interests. Yet the ants at least acknowledge a Greater Force – unlike some of our contemporaries, who have the outlook of ants but think that by their telescopes and microscopes they have a commanding view of all reality.

(19)

فَتَبَسَّ ضَاحِكًا مِّنْ قَوْلِهَا وَقَالَ رَبِّ أَوْزِعْنِي أَنْ أَشْكُرَ نِعْمَتَكَ الَّتِي  
أَنْعَمْتَ عَلَيَّ وَعَلَىٰ وَالِدَيَّ وَأَنْ أَعْمَلَ صَالِحًا تَرْضَاهُ وَأَدْخِلْنِي  
بِرَحْمَتِكَ فِي عِبَادِكَ الصَّالِحِينَ

Amused, he smiled at her speech, and said, “O Master, grant that I be thankful for the blessing You conferred on me and on my parents, and that I do deeds of virtue You approve of, and allow me entrance in among Your pious slaves.”

When we see our circumstances comparing favourably with that of others, our best response must be one of gratitude and humility. Sulaimān (peace be upon him) here expresses both. He is aware that without the bounty granted him directly and through his parents from his Creator, he could not have enjoyed the knowledge and freedom from fear that those



beneath him lack. Yet none of that produces pride, but only what seems to be a rather shy request – that he be counted as simply one among GOD’s good servants. The plight of the ants reminds him that his own position is a privilege bestowed rather than a title earned and deserved, illustrating not his own superiority but rather the overwhelming munificence of One Who gives all or withholds any part of it, freely and inscrutably. We can be sure, therefore, that his smile is not one of derision or haughtiness, but rather arises in recognition of a subtle hint from One Above him that his knowledge and power are weaker and easier for GOD to brush aside than it would be for Sulaimān to crush the ants.

(20)

وَتَقَفَّدَ الطَّيْرَ فَقَالَ مَا لِي لَا أَرَى الْهُدُودَ أَمْ كَانَ مِنَ الْغَائِبِينَ

He reviewed the birds, and said, “Why do I not see the hoopoe, or is he among the absent?”

Sulaimān (peace be upon him) has access to only a small portion of GOD’s Infinite Knowledge, and even that minuscule allotment must be inspected regularly for gaps and lack of order – defects, inconsistencies, and refractory thoughts. His review proceeds by asking questions and seeking answers, rather than assuming that he has full command of whatever he surveys.

The hoopoe in the Qur’ān is **hudhud**. Long considered a sacred bird in many cultures, the *hudhud* may have been singled out here because of its peculiar name, which suggests by its sound and spelling in Arabic an association with guidance. (See **Q7:156** – *innā hudnā ilaiKa* – **Indeed we have been guided unto You.**)

(21)

لَأَعَذِّبَنَّهُ عَذَابًا شَدِيدًا أَوْ لَأَذْبَحَنَّهُ أَوْ لِيَأْتِيَنِي بِسُلْطَانٍ مُبِينٍ

I shall inflict a heavy punishment on him or slaughter him, or he will bring to me a clear excuse.

Where Truth is Sovereign, and knowledge is the field of action, the active intellect must hold the power of life and death over its thoughts. The authority of the knower – and there are various levels, as **Over every knower is [another] one who knows (Q12:76)** – is expressed, explicitly and unapologetically, in terms of power.

[T]he exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and conversely knowledge constantly induces effects of power ... [just as]

it is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power.<sup>21</sup>

The life of the *hudhud*, bound to Sulaimān (peace be upon him) as an idea is bound to the mind that conceives it, is at his mercy for the sake of the greater life it serves. I am reminded here of a famous quote from A. N. Whitehead: “The purpose of thinking is to let the ideas die instead of us dying.”<sup>22</sup> As the author of this book, likewise, I am similarly remorseless with the thoughts at my disposal. I pluck, curtail, reshape, rename, and delete them ruthlessly, without a second’s hesitation ... unless their errant appearance is accompanied by **a clear excuse**.

In relation to the instruments of his intellectual prowess, Sulaimān’s power appears absolute, but not arbitrary. He accepts an **excuse** because, in Arabic, the actual word used here is **sulṭān**, meaning **authority**. The *hudhud* has been authorized to wander and explore if it comes back with more of that knowledge on which Sulaimān’s own power is founded.

(22)

فَمَكْتُ غَيْرَ بَعِيدٍ فَقَالَ أَحَطْتُ بِمَا لَمْ تُحِطْ بِهِ وَجِئْتُكَ مِنْ سَبَإٍ بِنَبَأٍ يَقِينٍ

**He had been but a little distance off, and said, “I learned what you have not yet been informed of, and have come to you from Saba’ with an unequivocal report.”**

The first comment of the *hudhud* shows Sulaimān (peace be upon him) cannot be regarded in this passage as a stand-in or symbol of GOD Himself. No place can be said to be at any **distance** from GOD, and no one can **learn** something outside of GOD’s Universal Knowledge. But for the active intellect, thoughts do have the power to fly off and come back with unexpected or exciting information. That is their purpose and ‘style’ of operation.

The active intellect revealed here is not the Active Intellect depicted as an emanation of the First Cause in the cosmology of early Muslim philosophers such as Al-Farabī. I use the term, rather, to portray how it can be a prophetic faculty when inspired with GOD’s revelation and direction,

<sup>21</sup> M. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, p. 52, from p. 13 of *Unmasking Power* by Stephen Brookfield.

<sup>22</sup> [https:// adamlencioni.com/you-are-not-your-thoughts-a-beginners-guide-to-the-thoughts-in-your-head/](https://adamlencioni.com/you-are-not-your-thoughts-a-beginners-guide-to-the-thoughts-in-your-head/)

or even, to some extent, an ordinary gift granted to humans who are determined to learn the lessons of the Qur'ān for their own benefit and guidance.

From the foregoing we see that it has these qualities:

- 1) It is bestowed by GOD directly, or indirectly through parents, teachers, et cetera, and not merely earned or acquired.
- 2) Its purpose is to magnify and perfect our worship and praise of Him.
- 3) It operates in three modes – (1) exploratory and communicative, (2) technical and intensive, and (3) spiritually integrative – symbolized by the birds, the *jinn*, and humans, respectively.
- 4) It preserves an appropriate attitude with regard to those below and The One Above.
- 5) It maintains a rigorous internal discipline of responsibility and consistency in its thoughts and deeds.
- 6) It acknowledges the existence of realms beyond its own immediate scope and the consequent need for intellectual freedom.

Now let us see how the active intellect confronts its incoherent counterpart, symbolized by Saba'.

## THE CONFUSED INTELLECT



Literal interpretations of revelation tend to be heavy-handed and bipolar. They regard individuals as unambiguous wholes – either sheep or goats, righteous or sinners, the saved or the damned. There is certainly much merit in this approach, for most readers lose their way with nuance and shades of grey. They want simple directions and a clear choice – right or left, up or down, white or black, and so on. The world is already a very complex place, and particularly so nowadays, when our political and religious leaders are themselves overwhelmed and embarrassed by the wealth and power that follow them into their professions. The Qur’ān, therefore, often has to take a peremptory approach in its rewards and warnings, and so likewise in the characterizations of those to whom they apply. Clarity is often the best antidote to spiritual confusion, as we will soon see.

But a closer look at certain verses, backed up by many *aḥādīth* of the Prophet (may GOD bless him and give him peace), show us that our world is alive with contradictions and exceptions. Light has varying degrees, and so does darkness; good and evil influences are inextricably intertwined. See, for example, the *ḥadīth* from Chapter 7: *Verily Satan’s reach is as far as the blood in the human being. I feared that he had cast something into your hearts.* Or consider *No one enters the Fire in whose heart is a mustard seed’s weight of faith, and no enters the Garden in whose heart is a mustard seed’s weight of pride*, which is one of many counter-intuitive examples from Chapter 32. And here is another one:

وَعَنْ ابْنِ مَسْعُودٍ قَالَ قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ مَا مِنْكُمْ  
مِنْ أَحَدٍ إِلَّا وَقَدْ وَكَّلَ بِهِ قَرِينُهُ مِنَ الْجِنِّ وَقَرِينُهُ مِنَ الْمَلَائِكَةِ قَالُوا  
وَإِيَّاكَ يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ قَالَ وَإِيَّايَ وَلَكِنَّ اللَّهَ أَعَانَنِي عَلَيْهِ فَأَسْلَمَ فَلَا  
يَأْمُرُنِي إِلَّا بِخَيْرٍ رَوَاهُ مُسْلِمٌ

*From Ibni Mas'ūd, who said, "The Messenger of AL-LĀH (may GOD bless him and give him peace) said, 'Each one you has a companion from among the jinn put in charge of him and [likewise] a companion from among the angels.' They asked, 'And you too, O Messenger of GOD?' He replied, 'And me too, but GOD aided me to overcome him. He submitted and does not order me to anything but good.'"*

*(Narrated by Muslim) Mishkātul-Maṣābīḥ 67, Book 1, Ḥadīth 61*

For most of us, however, this malign companion remains largely unchecked, feeding off the "black hole at the heart of who we are" that I mentioned in Chapter 7. We like to think of ourselves as utterly virtuous, and our enemies as all bad, but the reality is that we are not wholly good, nor is there anyone – even Satan – who is wholly evil.

One example of this inevitable ambiguity – and there are many others in the Qur'ān – is found in **Q3:152–155**. Addressing the believers, all of them companions of the Prophet, GOD tells how, at the Battle of Uhud, they were initially victorious, then some of them lost heart, differed among themselves, disobeyed commands, turned tail, and yet were finally pardoned. The final verse of this passage reveals how faith and satanic influence can coexist:

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ تَوَلَّوْا مِنْكُمْ يَوْمَ الْتَقَى الْجَمْعَانِ إِنَّمَا اسْتَزَلَّهُمُ الشَّيْطَانُ  
بِبَعْضِ مَا كَسَبُوا وَلَقَدْ عَفَا اللَّهُ عَنْهُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ غَفُورٌ حَلِيمٌ

Truly those who turned away upon the day two armies clashed were only caused to slip by Satan due to some of their own acts. AL-LĀH has pardoned them already. GOD is indeed Forgiving, Clement.

Even more compelling is the statement of Yūsuf (peace be upon him), spoken after his innocence was publicly vindicated:

وَمَا أَبرَأُ نَفْسِي إِنَّ النَّفْسَ لَأَمَّارَةٌ بِالسُّوءِ إِلَّا مَا رَحِمَ رَبِّي

And I do not absolve myself of sin. Indeed the self incites to wickedness, except for that on which my Lord has mercy. (Q12:53)

We should not be surprised, therefore, if the active intellect of Sulaimān (peace be upon him) discovers a similar ambiguity **but a little distance off**, in a kingdom with interesting parallels to his own.

(23)

إِلَيَّ وَجَدْتُ أَمْرًا تَمَلِكُهُمْ وَأُوتِيْتُ مِنْ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ وَلَهَا عَرْشٌ عَظِيمٌ

**“Verily I found a woman ruling them; she had been given some of everything, and she had an exalted throne.”**

This expression, **given some of everything**, is an eerie echo of what Sulaimān (peace be upon him) had said earlier, in verse 16, about his own kingdom. The wording, however, is so vague that it can refer not only to knowledge, which is what Sulaimān has, but also to what normally accompanies possession of **an exalted throne**, such as power and wealth. One might say, then, that power and wealth ‘sound’ like knowledge (referencing the famous equation, ‘Knowledge is power’), or are taken to be proofs of possessing knowledge, and quite often assume a similar authority, symbolized by the **mighty throne**.

(24)

وَجَدْتَهَا وَقَوْمَهَا يَسْجُدُونَ لِلشَّمْسِ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ وَزَيْنَ لَهُمُ الشَّيْطَانُ  
أَعْمَالَهُمْ فَصَدَّهُمْ عَنِ السَّبِيلِ فَهُمْ لَا يَهْتَدُونَ

**“I found her and her people making their prostrations to the sun instead of GOD, and Satan had adorned their acts for them and led them off the path so they would have no guidance,**

When the *hudhud* begins his report in verse 23, he tells us what we would expect from a mainstream news broadcast today. It gives us a figure to focus on and what we might consider important facts, such as her possessions and authority. Together with the timing implied in being **but a little distance off**, we have a succinct picture of Where, When, Who, and What. But Why is missing.

In today’s news, the agenda of the reporter and the choice of subject matter (determined at multiple levels for numerous interested parties, such as advertisers) are rarely explicit. The reporter-journalist is assumed to have the best interests of the reader or audience in mind and to be telling objective truth within the secular, physicalist frame that dominates mainstream media today. Subjects that confirm this frame, such as one’s own party members or allies, are reported on approvingly, while identifiable outsiders, such as official enemies, presumed opponents, or generic others classified by their different race, culture, or ideology, are cast in a negative light. Yet the effect is accomplished almost imperceptibly, with a veneer of rational detachment. The assumptions beneath these implicit biases are almost never brought out into the open, partly because, like Satan, they operate most effectively when unseen.

Contrarily, the text of the Qur’ān, such as in this verse, is often felt to

throb with the heavy drumbeat of theological judgement, and to be obsessed with topics, such as GOD, Satan, and Hell, that are deliberately kept out of polite journalistic discourse. For the modern secular reader, therefore, this verse sounds narrow-minded, biased, and anti-intellectual.

Yet this bias, if we can attribute bias to GOD, is deliberately blunt and intense. As spiritual beings with little time and enormous responsibilities, we cannot afford to dally in subtleties and skeptical posturing. Inasmuch as our intellect is actively concerned with our ultimate welfare, it demands that we recognize our situation, identify our main goal in life, and find **the path** to it immediately. The signs of good **guidance** need to be affirmed, and the opposition to them – **Satan** – **found** out and published without delay. That is the framework of the Qur’ān ... a direct and confrontational message. It vibrates with the relentless imminence of the Absolute.

(25)

أَلَّا يَسْجُدُوا لِلَّهِ الَّذِي يُخْرِجُ الْخَبَاءَ فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَيَعْلَمُ مَا تُخْفُونَ وَمَا تُعْلِنُونَ

“[Telling them] not to make prostration to AL-LĀH, Who brings forth what is hidden in the heavens and the earth, and knows what you conceal and what you manifest.”

‘Yes,’ says our suitably detached secular skeptic, ‘but why should the doings of another kingdom concern Sulaimān or his spies? Why not just ignore them or leave them alone?’

The answer, of course, is that the queen and her people represent more than mere ‘others,’ to be denigrated or dominated or, as the skeptic would have it, ignored. The active intellect, identified with Sulaimān (peace be upon him), is exploring the domain of His Lord, The King of kings. Under His heavens and on His earth, whatever we encounter that is **manifest** physically will inevitably **conceal** an inner spiritual reality. The kingdom of Sulaimān is a sign, and what is signified by that is his prophetic knowledge. The report from Saba’ signifies, likewise, the possibility not only of an external rival but of a **hidden** counterpart to that knowledge – the dark side of the intellect, where Satan, the most educated of GOD’s creatures, is active, adorning our acts and leading us astray. Even among prophets, Satan is at work. (See, for example, **Q18:63, 22:52, and 38:41.**) If our intellect is not actively seeking the truth, then he will encourage it to serve and submit to counterfeit authorities, symbolized by the queen’s throne and the sun.

In the Qur’ān, therefore, the encounter between Sulaimān (peace be

upon him) and the queen of Saba' is not a matter of mere historical interest, a tale of diplomacy or, as many have conjectured, a preamble to a royal marriage. What use is that to us today, or even at the time of revelation, more than a thousand years later than those events? Rather we are witnessing here the active intellect's discovery of its own dark secret, which GOD deliberately **brings forth** to guide prophet and reader alike.

(26)

اللَّهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ رَبُّ الْعَرْشِ الْعَظِيمِ

“AL-LĀH – there is no god but He, The Lord of the Exalted Throne.”

If this were a movie, and we were watching the *hudhud* reporting back to Sulaimān (peace be upon him), this is the verse where the bird turns away from the prophet – since Sulaimān does not need to be told Who GOD is – looks directly into the camera, and addresses us directly.

We, and especially the skeptics among us, need to be reminded what is so very wrong with encountering a **people making their prostrations to the sun instead of GOD**. The guiding principle and *raison d'être* of the active intellect is precisely this: **AL-LĀH – there is no god but He**. If you are serving only Him, then you do not prostrate yourself to any other thing. And, vice versa, if you are venerating any other thing without reference to GOD, no matter how great or unquestionable people think it is – one's race, language, or country, democracy, human rights, science, and other idols included – your devotion to AL-LĀH is void. There can be no room for compromise, equivocation, or ambiguity here, however much today's confused intellects may crave it. Each position negates and denies the validity of the other. The Qur'ān is emphatically insistent on this point. Say, “**O you deniers! / I do not worship what you worship, / And you are not worshippers of what I worship. (Q109:1–3)**

This is why the queen of Saba' is mentioned as having **an exalted throne**, whereas Sulaimān (peace be upon him) is not. By sanctioning or leading this flagrant parody of true worship, she is effectively setting up a counterfeit kingdom within GOD's Kingdom. Her throne may appear to be mighty, but it is, like the sun from which the power of her rule is supposedly derived, just another material object, a thing.

The real **Exalted Throne** is not of this or any world; it is inseparable from Who GOD is, like His Face, His Hand, His Knowledge, His Kingdom and so on, and thus is not a thing, just as GOD Himself is not a thing. The term for this in English is metonym, a figure of speech that represents a referent by means of something normally or figuratively associated with



it, such as ‘London’ for the government of the United Kingdom, or ‘crown’ for the prosecutor. When we **glorify the Name of your Sublimest Lord (Q87:1)**, we are not glorifying something other than Him, though some would argue otherwise. (See the Addendum: Text-Based and Miscellaneous Arguments in Appendix 1.) The **Exalted Throne** of AL-LĀH is a figurative representation of the supernatural moral and legislative Authority of GOD Himself.<sup>RR</sup> As such, it transcends space, time, and any other universal constants future ages may discover; it is certainly greater than one smallish star (our sun) among the ten billion trillion that contemporary scientists believe to exist.

We are not, however, commanded to worship the Throne of GOD, but rather The Possessor of all thrones, all suns, and any other exalted objects

#### RR

Literalist interpreters of the Qur’ān may object to my suggestion that GOD’s Throne has this or that meaning instead of simply accepting the bare reality of some object on which GOD actually seats himself.

I admit that the Qur’ān’s mention of a Throne stimulates the imagination in ways that the references I make to an abstract concept such as His Authority cannot equal. We are creatures who are habituated to visualization, and ‘Throne’ has that clear advantage over ‘Authority.’

But I would ask the literalists: “If the Throne has absolutely no symbolic meaning, and is simply a gigantic object of some sort that is suspended somehow over the universe, then of what use is it to you? How could it possibly influence your day-to-day life, enliven your relationship to GOD, or aid in your spiritual development? Meanwhile, the concept of ‘authority’ definitely affects you in countless ways on a practical, daily basis. You make decisions based on it, and view the world by means of the framework that ‘authority’ provides. In other words, ‘authority’ in one form or another is more real for you than ‘Throne.’ Do you think that AL-LĀH condemns that natural and inevitable preference of yours for the meaningful, however abstract, over something that is concrete, remote, lifeless, and utterly meaningless to you?”

or ideas that might waylay our miserable intellects. If we have lost Him by enthroning some other god within our hearts, we are truly **off the path**, for in doing so we lose our own true selves until we can admit Him back: **there is no god but He.**

(27)

قَالَ سَنَنْظُرُ أَصَدَقْتَ أَمْ كُنْتَ مِنَ الْكَاذِبِينَ

He [Sulaimān] said, “We shall see if you have spoken truly or have been among the liars.”

Not every thought of the active intellect is necessarily true. That is the risk – an acceptable and even necessary risk – that the knowledge-seeker must take. He must constantly push beyond the comfort zone of his own mind into the doubtful regions where truth and falsehood are intertwined (as I am doing in this book). These regions are not entirely foreign to him; they constitute the dark areas of the soul, where **the self incites to wickedness**. Whatever returns from there, in the form of reports, suspicions, and educated guesses, must be interrogated for potential bias, exaggeration, vanity, and self-deception.

(28)

اَذْهَبْ بِكِتَابِي هَذَا فَأَلْقِهِ إِلَيْهِمْ ثُمَّ تَوَلَّ عَنْهُمْ فَانظُرْ مَاذَا يَرْجِعُونَ

Take this, my dispatch, cast it in among them, then draw back from them and see what their response will be.

Why does Sulaimān (peace be upon him) decide to communicate by a written message? The wording of it, as we shall see, is curt and concise, and thus easy enough to be memorized and conveyed orally. And in the Qur’ān, all of the prophets are portrayed as oral messengers, confronting their people face to face; if they have a written Word to convey as well, they bring it with them, as Mūsā (peace be upon him) did, rather than send it ahead of them.

The written word is the instrument of the distant and the everlasting. It is one way of manifesting the transcendent – as opposed to the immanent – nature of GOD, and is particularly useful for attitudes that require the greatest possible objectivity from both sender and receiver. As a strategy of self-interrogation, therefore, it has advantages that ordinary introspection or self-talk cannot easily reproduce. Think of how often books or other media that currently offer advice on self-help recommend that we keep a journal, make a list, or in some fashion or another write down for greater clarity what we need to know about ourselves. By communicating with another aspect of our own self in written form, we are establishing the kind of distance we would need if we were dealing with another person, yet without the need to see that person. We are asking that ‘other’ to take the same stance, to be as objective in his or her response as we intend to be.

We are, ultimately, demanding that the ‘other’ come up to the level of impartial, accountable self-awareness that all of us will face on the Day we encounter the book of our deeds and thoughts open before us prior to Judgement.

(29)

قَالَتْ يَا أَيُّهَا الْمَلَأُ إِنِّي أُلْقِيَ إِلَيَّ كِتَابٌ كَرِيمٌ

She [the queen] said, “O you Nobles! Verily there has been sent to me an eminent epistle.”

Notice the difference between the queen, who starts by consulting with her inner circle of magnates, and Sulaimān (peace be upon him), who begins by praising GOD and then turns to address humanity – “O People!”<sup>ss</sup>

The queen never once mentions her people, nor do her nobles, and yet

SS

Who we think our audience is constitutes a leading determinant of what our intellectual frame will be and what person or persons rule our minds as authorities or sources of value and order. In this book, my first concern is that it be acceptable to GOD, given what I know, however little, of His love of those who strive in His path to know Him truly.

My second ‘readership,’ guiding me in my choice of topics and style, is myself. In other words, what you see here is what I would want to discover if I were only a reader, looking for the ideas that would fill my mental void.

I tried many times to write a book like this with other readers in mind – scholars, journalists, young persons, adults, Muslims, non-Muslims, et cetera – but I could never be confident that it would satisfy their demands, let alone those of the Only One Who deserves my respect and fear. So I gave up on that tertiary goal, and now only write for Him, or rather according to my understanding of Him, and then for myself, whom I hope to know better as a result of this exercise.

their power and authority must be ‘for’ those they rule. Sadly, however, as we will soon see, rulers generally consider only themselves and their narrow interests – which is as true today as it was then.

A legitimate ruler, which in the individual is the active intellect, is constantly aware of all the members that constitute his kingdom – not only his faculties or departments of communication, application, and judgement but also the various participants in and contributors to the general welfare,

including even the ‘ants’ of his realm. These could be the family members who are unwilling or unable to understand him, or his economic and social responsibilities, or his material conditions – food, drink, clothing, and the like. The active intellect is the controlling centre of a responsible, integrated, and comprehensive self, rather than a court of posturers and flatterers of the type every little egotist can cultivate in his or her own present-day social media echo chamber.

(30)

إِنَّهُ مِنْ سُلَيْمَانَ وَإِنَّهُ بِإِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

It is from Sulaimān, and truly it is [worded as] “In the Name of GOD, The Gracious, The Compassionate,”

The queen may have referred in the previous verse to **an eminent epistle** because of this introductory phrase, **In the Name of GOD, The Gracious, The Compassionate**. The body of the message derives its power to persuade from this initial reference to the Authority it invokes. The Qur’ān, likewise, bases its authority on the Identity and hence the Name of its Author, which is why every *sūrah* but *Sūratit-Taubah*, the ninth *Sūrah*, begins with this invocation.

Consider the following diagram:<sup>23</sup>

#### Scheler's *a priori* Hierarchy of Values



1) The queen addresses her **nobles**, who occupy a position signified by the ‘Virtue Values’ in the diagram. This may be another reason why she refers to the missive from Sulaimān (peace be upon him) as **eminent**, since eminence is their core concern.

2) As the active intellect, Sulaimān, on the other hand, is the symbol of ‘Wisdom Values’ – a higher tier in the Hierarchy – while invoking the

<sup>23</sup> <https://twitter.com/evekeneinan/status/1012822131112136704>.

authority of ‘Transcendent Values’, which are those of GOD Himself.

3) The queen’s **throne** is based on neither wisdom nor nobility, but on keeping power, (i.e., **some of everything**), and worship of the sun. In this case, the sun is not seen as a sign of GOD or a symbol of rationality, but rather as the source of what people need to stay alive, namely the heat and light that all living things require for growth, which are ‘Utility Values’ and ‘Sensual Values.’

In the same way, I would argue, the modern worship of science is not really about the love of truth, one of the highest immaterial values, but rather the prestige, advantages, and comforts that ‘science’ claims to provide. Philosophy is literally the ‘love of wisdom,’ but who cares about that nowadays, or says that they ‘believe in philosophy’? Would science be as popular as it is if it had not sucked up all the credit for our relatively better health, affluent lifestyle, and lethal military might? People respect it as a methodology (as they should), but many also idolize it as an authority. Sun- and fire-worshippers of previous millennia made similar calculations about how their interests were being served, attributing their good fortune to a sun or fire god rather than the GOD Who created the sun, fire, and all the regularities that science can only discover, but is powerless to invent.

(31)

أَلَّا تَعْلُوا عَلَيَّ وَأْتُونِي مُسْلِمِينَ

“Do not act haughtily with me, but come to me submissively.”

This is the speech and the tone one would expect from a recognizable authority – from a husband to a wife, or a father to a child.<sup>TT</sup> But the queen and her kingdom are but newly discovered, and have had no contact with Sulaimān (peace be upon him) prior to this message. How could they, in such circumstances, **act haughtily**? And by what authority does Sulaimān command an independent sovereign to come to him **submissively**? If we apply a literal or historical framework to this passage, it jars with our modern sense of diplomatic norms and international relations.

It is precisely the oddity of this verse, however, that convinces me of the deeper psychological and spiritual truths that are to be found beneath the surface of the entire narrative. Sulaimān is confronting a confused intellect – his own. Remember the tradition I quoted earlier in this chapter

## II

If contemporary readers find this offensive, I can only shrug. GOD did not reveal the Qur'ān to appease (nor to inflame) modern sensitivities about gender equality, the rights of children, or the supposed evils of patriarchy. I will not have a chance to discuss these issues in this book. It suffices now to observe that if the authority of the Qur'ān is to mean anything for this generation, it must mean what is clearly stated in **Q4:34** regarding the obedience wives owe to husbands, and in **Q17:23** regarding the respect children owe to parents.

regarding the *jinn* who was the *companion* of the Prophet (may GOD bless him and give him peace): *AL-LĀH aided me to overcome him. He submitted and does not order me to anything but good.* Or the confession, also cited earlier, of Yūsuf (peace be upon him): **And I do not absolve myself of sin. Indeed the self incites to wickedness, except for that on which my Lord has mercy.** The active intellect has encountered for the first time a challenge to its authority within its own realm – an alternate intellect with its own throne and a different set of priorities. Here we have the issue of cognitive dissonance laid out

symbolically in the form of two monarchs whose proximity has suddenly become apparent. The intolerability of the situation is clearly expressed by the only intellect that has a valid mandate to rule.

Sulaimān (peace be upon him) asserts his natural authority without compunction or vacillation. By virtue of the knowledge granted him from GOD, he has not only the right but also the duty to command obedience, like a general confronting mutinous troops or an intellect seeking the mental consistency it needs to function. I challenge any critic who thinks otherwise to live with the day-to-day prospect of holding two contradictory thoughts within his mind at the same time and giving them equal voice. No, the active intellect must assert its authority if it is to be both active and intellectual. This is why the Prophet (may GOD bless him and give him peace) was repeatedly (**Q2:147**, **6:114**, and **10:94**) told:

الْحَقُّ مِنْ رَبِّكَ فَلَا تَكُنْ مِنَ الْمُمْتَرِينَ

**The truth is from your Lord, so do not be among the doubtful. (Q3:60)**

The confused intellect, meanwhile, has no standing – nor even a life – without the leniency granted it for **an appointed term (Q30:8)** by an Authority it has yet to recognize. It, like all unsanctioned authority in this

world, is operating on the assumption that somehow its temporary power is valid, that the mere fact of its existence legitimizes it, and that there is no active intellect to take control of it.

(32)

قَالَتْ يَا أَيُّهَا الْمَلَأُ أَفْتُونِي فِي أَمْرِي مَا كُنْتُ قَاطِعَةً أَمْرًا حَتَّى  
تَشْهَدُونَ

She said, “O you Nobles! Counsel me in my decision. I have never taken a decision until you are attending.”

The key word here is **amr**, which, depending on the context, can mean ‘thing,’ ‘affair,’ ‘business,’ ‘order,’ ‘authority,’ or, as in this case, ‘thing to be ordered,’ hence a ‘decision.’ A leader with authority is an *amīr*, from the same root. The most common title for the early successors to the authority of the Prophet (may GOD bless him and give him peace) was *Amīrul-mu’minīn* – ‘Leader of the Believers.’

For the active intellect, valid authority constitutes the root of its power and function, which is why the first speech of Sulaimān (peace be upon him) is **Praise is due to GOD, Who gave us excellences ... (Q27:15)**. There can be no doubt or question about the Source of any kind of authority, be it political, moral, or intellectual. For the confused intellect, however, authority – who has it and how to use it – is a problem. In the lead-up to the Battle of Uḥud (**Q3:154**), the hypocrites voiced both their confusion and their problem with the authority of GOD and His Messenger:

وَطَائِفَةٌ قَدْ أَهَمَّتْهُمْ أَنْفُسُهُمْ يَظُنُّونَ بِاللَّهِ غَيْرَ الْحَقِّ ظَنَّ الْجَاهِلِيَّةِ  
يَقُولُونَ هَلْ لَنَا مِنَ الْأَمْرِ مِنْ شَيْءٍ قُلْ إِنَّ الْأَمْرَ كُلَّهُ لِلَّهِ يُخْفُونَ فِي  
أَنْفُسِهِمْ مَا لَا يُبْدُونَ لَكَ

A faction was concerned about themselves; by wrong conjectures on AL-LĀH they entertained the thoughts of ignorance. They said, “Do we have any share in the affair?” Say, “Truly all of the affair [or the authority] belongs to GOD.” They hid within themselves what they would not reveal to you.

The message of Sulaimān (peace be upon him) has, from the outset, called the authority of the queen into question. Her first comment reveals this confusion. Does her authority come from the sun she worships? The sun has nothing to say to her. From her throne? It symbolizes some kind of authority, but where is the power backing that symbol? Does authority

reside in her? She does not feel it, but she cannot admit that outright. She turns, consequently, to her nobles, and defers to them.

The wording here is crucial to understanding her situation and state of mind. I have translated **mā kuntu qāṭi'an amran** as **I have never taken a decision**, but an extremely literal translation would read **I have not been cutting an affair**, in which “cutting” is deciding, just as *de + caedere* (to cut) is the Latin origin of our English “decide.” The queen is inclined, with the consent of her nobles, to ‘cut off’ this communication with Sulaimān (peace be upon him), thus preserving her authority, but she knows, from the very moment she read **In the Name of GOD, The Gracious, The Compassionate** that she does not really have that authority.

When a confused intellect encounters signs of an active intellect, as what the queen detects in this message or what today’s reader finds in the Qur’ān, its first instinct is to hide or flee, to protect its habitual way of life.

لَوْ اِطَّلَعْتَ عَلَيْهِمْ لَوَلَّيْتَ مِنْهُمْ فِرَارًا وَلَمُلِئْتَ مِنْهُمْ رُغْبًا

**If you had looked at them, you would have fled from them, and would be filled with fear because of them. (Q18:18)**

وَأَلْقِ عَصَاكَ فَلَمَّا رَآهَا تَهْتَزُّ كَأَنَّهَا جَانٌّ وَلَّى مُدْبِرًا وَلَمْ يُعَقِّبْ يَا مُوسَى لَا تَخَفْ إِنِّي لَا يَخَافُ لَدَيَّ الْمُرْسَلُونَ

**Cast down your staff. Then when he saw it writhing as if it were possessed, he turned away headlong. “O Mūsā! Do not fear! Indeed the messengers are not afraid with me.” (Q27:10)**

A ruler may hide from what she fears, but at the cost of her authority and power. If she wants to remain queen, her only options are to submit or resist. She lacks the motivation to submit – and Sulaimān (peace be upon him) has promised her nothing – but does she have sufficient power to resist? So she turns to her grantees. Might they have another way in mind?

(33)

قَالُوا نَحْنُ أَوْلَا قُوَّةً وَأُولُوا بَأْسٍ شَدِيدٍ وَالْأَمْرُ إِلَيْكِ فَانْظُرِي مَاذَا تَأْمُرِينَ

**They said, “We are endowed with strength and capable of violent force, and yet authority is yours. Consider what you will command.”**

When in doubt, the confused intellect consults its coterie of impulsive and turbulent desires. But without the sense of direction that only authority, even if a counterfeit one, can provide, the passions are in fact passive;



they have no sense of where to go. Unlike the forces Sulaimān (peace be upon him) commands, they have free rein, but that very freedom leaves them with a feeling of vacuity and aimlessness. They recognize the threat that Sulaimān's authority poses, but they too see no way out. Unlike the exploratory yet disciplined power of observation and inquiry in Sulaimān's army, symbolized by the birds, these nobles are not used to seeing, but only feeling. And so they 'pass the buck' back to the queen. It is, in fact, their incoherent need for both power and guidance that has been influencing the queen, which is why they are mentioned here. They kept their place by feeding her pretensions, but now are leaving her nervous, hesitant, and perplexed.

(34)

قَالَتْ إِنَّ الْمُلُوكَ إِذَا دَخَلُوا قَرْيَةً أَفْسَدُوهَا وَجَعَلُوا أَعِزَّةَ أَهْلِهَا أَذِلَّةً  
وَكَذَلِكَ يَفْعَلُونَ

**She said, "Indeed when kings invade a town they ruin it, and make the noblest of its folk the most debased. And that is what they do."**

Here we have an example of the inversion of values that occurs whenever a community or individual substitutes for the rule of GOD the mores of the so-called nobility or high society, which could be a class based on military valour, wealth, or worldly knowledge (e.g., science). When that illegitimate power structure is finally confronted with the Word of GOD and the imperatives of the active intellect, it only thinks of what it will lose – not of what it will gain in terms of truth, wisdom, mercy, and peace.

وَقُلْ جَاءَ الْحَقُّ وَرَهَقَ الْبَاطِلُ إِنَّ الْبَاطِلَ كَانَ زَهُوقًا

**And say, "The Truth has come, and falsehood has departed. Verily the false has ever been departing." (Q17:81)**

It cannot imagine anything better than what it has, which is why the active intellect's job when confronting that structure is to give it a jolt and declare its own authority in the clearest terms.

By saying **when kings invade a town they ruin it** the queen of Saba' is insinuating, of course, that Sulaimān (peace be upon him) is just like other kings, and will therefore act like all the other famous criminals who have been glorified for the scale of their atrocities (Alexander, Genghis Khan, Timur, Napoleon, et al.). By maligning AL-LĀH's messenger and His message in this way,<sup>uu</sup> she has only managed to confuse herself by

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If we reinterpret this comment by the queen to mean what the confused intellect believes to be the case rather than what is actually true, then her words are apposite. When the active intellect intrudes upon the fantasies of the confused intellect, it does indeed **ruin** those illusions, and upsets the inverted values that had been in place so that what was once considered **no-blest** (i.e., the love of power, money, et cetera) is **debased**, and vice versa.

ignoring what the active intellect wants – a wholesome relationship with **GOD, The Gracious, The Compassionate** – and concealing what she wants, which is little more than the comfortable illusion of being **the noblest of its folk** and hence deserving the power she has. And so, given what she is implying about the character of Sulaimān, she comes up with a plan.

(35)

وَإِنِّي مُرْسِلَةٌ إِلَيْهِمْ بِهَدِيَّةٍ  
فَقَاطِرَةٌ بِمَ يَرْجِعُ الْمُرْسَلُونَ

**“I am sending them a gift, and seeing what the messengers will bring as a reply.”**

By issuing a command, Sulaimān (peace be upon him) has asserted his authority. That authority is derived from the Authority Who commands him, namely GOD. Rather than submitting to it, the queen decides to bargain, offering some of her wealth as a substitute for relinquishing the lie on which her and her nobles’ power has been founded.

This is a common tactic among people or conceptual systems that have a ‘problem with authority.’ The issue of who has the authority is ‘off the table’ of discussion because it is bound to provoke vehement disagreement. Tacit suspension of judgement in such matters is, of course, a wise policy where clarity would produce conflict. We can refer to the actions of the Messenger of AL-LĀH (may GOD bless him and give him peace) at the Treaty of Ḥudaybiyah. He did not insist upon his GOD-given authority in negotiating with the leaders of the Quraish, who would not acknowledge it. And so, in this correspondence between Sulaimān (peace be upon him) and the queen, a gift would be a natural first step toward diplomatic relations between sovereigns.

But as I have pointed out before, this story is concerned with much more than the case of independent kingdoms or international diplomacy in the ancient world. We are being shown the constituents, both actual and

potential, that inform our own character – a character that demands unity as one of the basic features of a healthy existence. GOD demands that we regard Him as One, and reveals to us the story of Sulaimān (peace be upon him) as a parable pertaining to our own quest for oneness.

So how should our active intellect respond to bribes or flattery from our confused intellect, desperate as it is to maintain a semblance of power in our life?

# 39.

## ENTERING THE PALACE OF GLASS



Nearly all modern readers of the Qur'ān are like the queen of Saba' in some respects. We have a coterie of pet desires that surround and flatter us; we have a comfortable sense of superiority or security in our habitual delusions; and we would like very much to be unmolested by the Truth in any form that goes beyond reading the occasional short message from afar. If the Truth looks as if it might imperil our snug little kingdom and its guilty pleasures, we are ready to sacrifice some of our ordinary goods to quell Its demands. If hush money is required to make It go away, we will be glad to pay.

A truly active intellect, however, will not leave us alone. It will respond to our inaction with all the force that it has at its disposal.

(36)

فَلَمَّا جَاءَ سُلَيْمَانَ قَالَ أَتُمِدُّونَنِ بِمَالٍ فَمَا آتَانِيَ اللَّهُ خَيْرٌ مِمَّا آتَاكُمْ بَلْ أَنْتُمْ بِهَدْيِكُمْ تَفْرَحُونَ

When [her envoy] came to Sulaimān, he said, “Are you providing me with wealth? What GOD has given me is better than what He has given you. Yet with your present you exult!”

It has become clear to Sulaimān (peace be upon him) that the queen is unaware of her condition and what is superior to it, namely **what GOD has given** him. The confused intellect has only the dimmest conception of what GOD's gifts could mean, as everything is measured by its own impoverished experience. The queen thinks that his power is like hers, that she is dealing with a court full of powerful nobles (i.e., **I am sending them a gift**) rather than a single decisive authority, that Sulaimān would act unjustly like other kings, and that he could be swayed by the things that com-

monly move them to change their minds. Her gift to him is, at best, a tentative groping in the dark, seeking – and failing – to reach past her ignorance to some form of understanding on her terms.

(37)

أَرْجِعْ إِلَيْهِمْ فَلَنَأْتِيَنَّهُمْ بِجُنُودٍ لَا قِبَلَ لَهُمْ بِهَا وَلَنُخْرِجَنَّهُمْ مِنْهَا أَذِلَّةً  
وَهُمْ صَاغِرُونَ

**“Return to them, for we are bringing to them forces they cannot resist and we shall drive them out of there disgraced and lowly.”**

The active intellect not only has the courage of its convictions but the means with which to subordinate its confused counterpart. If she will not come to him, he will go to her. Either way, there is no question of leaving her alone.

How is it that the confused intellect **cannot resist**? It is simply this: when the active intellect is determined to accomplish its end, there is no mortal power that can deter it. Full authority has been given to the soul of man, when subordinated to the Will of GOD, to expel from its realm or overcome whatever assumes a false dominion to oppose its commands.

In Chapter 31, I provided some examples of souls who had to be brought low before they could become open to a new vision of reality. The old frames of assured survival, health, wealth, reputation, self-respect, and general comfort needed to be demolished before new, more expansive frames could take their place. Nothing in the queen’s environment was supporting or encouraging such a creative destruction. Sulaimān (peace be upon him) recognizes that, and so promises her nothing but defeat and humiliation if she does not dismantle her customs and comforts by an act of submission. It is only in a state of lowliness and self-abandonment, like a child coming to school for the first time, that we can be truly ready to learn.

Is persuasion an option? Yes, even with Satan. There are many passages in the Qur’ān where we find the devil engaged in wordplay, justifying his insubordination by various excuses. GOD refrains, however, from forcing Satan to obey, for that would kill the spirit and negate the whole purpose of creating intelligent beings. One cannot achieve faith, either in oneself or in someone else, by compulsion.

وَلَوْ شَاءَ رَبُّكَ لَأَمَنَّ مَنْ فِي الْأَرْضِ كُلَّهُمْ جَمِيعًا أَفَأَنْتَ تُكْرِهُ النَّاسَ  
حَتَّى يَكُونُوا مُؤْمِنِينَ

**And if your Lord had willed it, altogether everyone on Earth would have believed [in Him]. Would you compel mankind till they become believers? (Q10:99)**

As we shall see, moreover, Sulaimān (peace be upon him) utilizes a very subtle method to persuade the queen that she has been deluded. But she has to be in his presence for that method to work.

We are urged, however, to shape the conditions wherein faith is more likely to flourish, which is the main purpose of education, preaching, the authority of parents over children, all kinds of moral influence, the exercise of economic and political power, and even waging war against oppression in whatever form it takes.<sup>V V</sup> The Arabic word for this exertion, either in one's environment or in oneself, when the intention is to promote the conditions that facilitate the growth (not the imposition) of true faith, is *jihād*.

#### V V

Acts of criminal injustice (e.g., the institution of phony 'Islamic' banking and Arab abuse of expatriate labourers), connivance in oppression (e.g., the invasion of Afghanistan and 'Irāq and the occupation of Palestine), and the corruption so prevalent in supposedly Muslim societies are the chief reasons I consider the so-called Islamic governments of the world – let alone other governments – illegitimate. They lack the moral force needed to proclaim *jihād*. (At this time of writing, an Islamic state has been proclaimed in Afghanistan; what traditional values, tenacity, and courage have won, hard-headed stupidity and hard-hearted legalism will lose.)

(38)

قَالَ يَا أَيُّهَا الْمَلَأُ أَيُّكُمْ يَأْتِينِي بِعَرْشِهَا قَبْلَ أَنْ يَأْتُونِي مُسْلِمِينَ

He said, "O you Nobles! Which of you can bring her throne to me before they come to me submissively?"

Between verses 37 and 38 we have an instance of ellipsis – a gap in the narrative that the reader is expected to fill. Here it is understood that Sulaimān (peace be upon him) has been informed that he does not need to marshal his forces. The queen and her court are coming to him. By this ellipsis, the reader may also conclude that the right attitude and a clear determination to follow through with action, without the necessity of a long-winded discourse, can suffice to effect the desired change in one's relations with others or in one's own soul.

Sulaimān (peace be upon him) intends to utilize the queen's throne for a demonstration like that which Mūsā (peace be upon him) experienced when AL-LĀH told him (Q27:10) to throw down his staff and then pick it up again when he saw it turn into a serpent. The confused intellect needs to see the illusion and unreliability that underlies *ad-dunyā* – the world of change and semi-reality.

(39)

قَالَ عَفَرِيْتُ مِنَ الْجِنَّ أَنَا آتِيكَ بِهِ قَبْلَ أَنْ تَقُومَ مِنْ مَقَامِكَ وَإِنِّي عَلَيْهِ أَقْوَىٰ أَمِينٌ

A stalwart from the *jinn* said, “I can bring you it before you rise from your position. Truly I am strong enough for that and trusted.”

The character of the *jinn* is apparent here. A robust representative of that race offers a technical solution, one which is speedy and reliable. His offer implies the use of force – a physical response to what he considers a physical problem (**before you rise from your position**).

How exactly this is to be accomplished is not really an issue here, though it is worth remembering that the *jinn*, as noted in Chapter 37, are made of fire, are inclined to tasks that involve know-how, and may have elemental capabilities that humans would find extraordinary. One might call this the modern answer to the problem, since technology has so completely captured our imagination over the past century or more. Indeed, one could say that we are living in an age of *jinn* (rather than prophets, scholars, birds, or angels).

(40)

قَالَ الَّذِي عِنْدَهُ عِلْمٌ مِنَ الْكِتَابِ أَنَا آتِيكَ بِهِ قَبْلَ أَنْ يَرْتَدَّ إِلَيْكَ طَرْفُكَ فَلَمَّا رَآهُ مُسْتَقَرًّا عِنْدَهُ قَالَ هَذَا مِنْ فَضْلِ رَبِّي لِيَبْلُوَنِي أَأَشْكُرُ أَمْ أَكْفُرُ وَمَنْ شَكَرَ فَإِنَّمَا يَشْكُرُ لِنَفْسِهِ وَمَنْ كَفَرَ فَإِنَّ رَبِّي غَنِيٌّ كَرِيمٌ

One with knowledge from the Book said, “I can bring you it before your glance comes back to you.” So when he [Sulaiman] saw it firmly set before him, he said, “This is from the favour of my Lord, to test if I am grateful or ungrateful. One who thanks is only thankful for himself; and [as for] one who is ungrateful, verily my Lord is Self-Sufficient, Generous.”

If every created thing represents a word from GOD, then the Book is where all the words in His creation are compiled. We are accustomed to

‘reading’ His words one by one and in no clearly discernible order, but rather as we encounter them in this world. Suppose, however, we could read the Book where those words were originally composed. Would we not see more of the Power and Intelligence of The Author when laid out in sentences and paragraphs? And if the pages are pressed together, as we can imagine they are when the Book is closed, there could be juxtapositions of words from facing pages pressed against each other, as it were, suggesting interactions and coincidences that no amount of worldly knowledge could supply.

Playing with this metaphorical image is all too literal, of course, but nonetheless useful in conjecturing what **knowledge from the Book** could provide: a key to an alternate transcription from the Preserved Tablet to the Book of Nature, the latter being the only book that today’s scientists are disposed to read. What the **stalwart from the jinn** offered was no more than action within the phenomenal world as we find it written out, in long-hand as it were, around us. But the **one** (from the race of men, according to Ibnī Kathīr’s sources) **with knowledge from the Book** offered something even quicker and more valuable, namely perception. The action, after all, was only demanded in order to produce a perception, as we shall see. Why not cut out the intermediary step and produce the perception directly, straight out of its source, **from the Book** itself?

I have no idea how this could actually be done, nor does any of my readers. (Or if you do, why waste your time reading my book? Write your own, and send me a copy.) The important point here, though, is that the power of Sulaimān (peace be upon him) was founded on knowledge rather than brute force. He wanted the throne to appear as a means of persuasion and education rather than a mere display of magical prowess. He needed the queen’s throne as a ‘teachable moment,’ after which it, with all its irrelevant gold and gems, could be discarded. Once it appears, it is never mentioned again.

It is knowledge, once again, that prompts him to identify the Source of these blessings, namely AL-LĀH, and pinpoint gratitude as the key ingredient of His creatures’ success. Erudition and ability, no matter how extraordinary, if untouched by gratitude, are ultimately disconnected from their Author and Provider and lead to states of misguidance, confusion, and corruption. It is expansive thankfulness to GOD, not our talents or powers, that benefits us in the long run. (See the Hierarchy of Values in the previous chapter; Wisdom Values such as knowledge are placed below Transcendent Values such as gratitude.) Heartfelt gratitude is naturally more prized by **Al-Karīm, The Honourable** (or **Generous**), Who eagerly



looks for our upward, boundless intentions far more than the pitiful limits of our learning or worldly successes. He cares more about where we are headed than what has been stuffed into our heads.

مَا يَفْعَلُ اللَّهُ بِعَذَابِكُمْ إِنْ شَكَرْتُمْ وَآمَنْتُمْ وَكَانَ اللَّهُ شَاكِرًا عَلِيمًا

What has GOD to do with penalizing you if you are grateful and have faith? And GOD has ever been Appreciative, Knowing. (Q4:147)

(41)

قَالَ نَكِّرُوا لَهَا عَرْشَهَا نَنْظُرُ أَتَهْتَدِي أَمْ تَكُونُ مِنَ الَّذِينَ لَا يَهْتَدُونَ

He said, “Disguise her throne for her that we might see if she will go aright or is among the ones who are misguided.”

What particular alterations were made to the throne are not specified in the Qur’ān, and are of no significance here. The focus should be on 1) what is chosen for the change, and 2) the fact of the change itself. Both are instrumental in altering the queen’s state of mind.

Why did Sulaimān (peace be upon him) summon his nobles to **bring her throne to me** if his only purpose was to demonstrate his extraordinary knowledge or majesty? With such power as he possessed, he could have produced almost anything and then altered its appearance, as the magicians of Fir’aun were able to do with their staves and ropes that were made to look like serpents. The answer, of course, is that he had that particular thing transported because it was hers, and because of what it represented for her.

Sulaimān (peace be upon him) engages her attention by working with something that is familiar to her, and to which she is emotionally attached. One might even say that her throne is the centre of her world; it symbolizes her authority, which in her mind is the basis of her power and well-being. Rather than expounding some theological theory to her (which is what I, lacking his power, have to do by means of this book), he uses a concrete example – always a better pedagogical option. The student ‘sees’ what is meant rather than merely ‘hearing’ (or reading about) it. And if the example chosen ‘belongs’ to the student, then how much more potent is the lesson!

The active intellect is able to identify what the confused intellect takes to be its authority and works with that. The confused intellect always bases its right to govern the other members of its ‘kingdom’ on a claim that is false, which in this case is that the sun is worthy of worship. Translated

into modern terms, we could call it the belief that power, utility, pleasure, and/or survival are sufficient reasons for living in this world, for surrounding ourselves with supporters, and for instituting an intellectual regime that dominates the spirit and yet fears the intrusions of other **kings**.

The queen's throne, (i.e., the authority of the confused intellect), is altered so that she cannot unreservedly say 'That is mine.' She can see that her throne is either changeable or reproducible in detail, thus diminishing her sense of control and ownership. The authority that stands for the heart and purpose of her existence now appears to be at the mercy of a higher power. Is it even hers anymore?

Faced with this challenge, the queen has two ways out. She can refuse to recognize the basic similarity, reject the lesson being offered, and simply say, 'It is not exactly the same; my throne is back home where I left it, and this is a trick, a counterfeit.' She can, in effect, assert that things like her throne do not change. If a change is observed, what we have is a new and different thing. Such an assertion would supposedly maintain her legitimacy, insofar as the throne is both a thing and a symbol of her power and authority. The popular belief, however, is that things do change, and by opposing that common-sense view of the matter, she would be relegating her authority to the shrunken realm of the distant and irrelevant.

A second option is to accept the throne as presented, regardless of the changes made to it or the fact that it was transported and altered without her knowledge. In that case, however, she would be admitting not only that things change, which is true enough, but also that her authority itself can be changeable. Yet it is clear that an authority so easily subject to external forces is no longer reliable or worthy of respect. None of us gladly accepts our authority changing except under some external pressure or attraction, (i.e., some higher authority). The queen could call it her throne, but she would be unable to set a limit on where or how its identity and integrity might be further impaired. Her possession of it, meanwhile, would be both disputable and vacuous.<sup>ww</sup>

Either of these 'ways out' would be a failure for her, an instance of a lesson not learned but lost – in other words, misguidance.

#### WW

A few modern examples should help clarify this matter of the queen's two possible responses to her altered throne.

An American who believes the Constitution with all its amendments is sacred, a European who longs for the days when kings ruled by divine

WW (continued)

right, or a Catholic who swears by Papal infallibility could each be considered as hanging onto a worldly legitimacy that ought to be impervious to change.

The alternative is much in favour these days – a vision of authority based on a shape-shifting, kaleidoscopic ‘consensus’ on what is right and wrong or true and false ... from feminism to gay rights to reverse racial discrimination to gender fluidity.

There may come a time, though, when today’s proponents of change will insist that their idols are permanently true.

(42)

فَلَمَّا جَاءَتْ قِيلَ أَهَكَذَا عَرْشُكَ قَالَتْ كَأَنَّهُ هُوَ وَأُوتِينَا الْعِلْمَ مِنْ قَبْلِهَا  
وَكُنَّا مُسْلِمِينَ

She was asked when she arrived, “Is your throne like this?” “As if it were,” she said. [Sulaimān remarked], “And we received the knowledge prior to her while we were submissive.”

The brevity of her response (and of the commentary in Ibni Kathīr accompanying it) seems to belie the importance of this moment. Yet everything in the narrative thus far – the report from the *hudhud*, the message sent by Sulaimān (peace be upon him), the queen’s evasive response, the threat of invasion, and the ‘abduction’ of her throne – has been leading up to this: **As if it were.**

Immediately upon her uttering these four words, Sulaimān (peace be upon him) turns to the reader (like the *hudhud* earlier in verse 26) and begins to speak about knowledge and submission. What was it about her utterance that would prompt his remarks in this and in the following verse?

First of all, it should be remembered, the purpose of this test was to see if **she will go aright or is among the ones who are misguided.** I mentioned two escape routes for her that would signify misguidance, namely proud rejection or a humiliating loss of integrity. Fortunately, for us and for her, she is intelligent enough to see a third path midway between the two. This middle way represents the important first step on the road to the knowledge gained by those who submit.

Sulaimān (peace be upon him) interrupts the narrative here<sup>xx</sup> to inform the reader that this same knowledge she has just glimpsed had been obtained by him earlier, but in a state of submission. The active intellect receives authority, and hence knowledge, while the confused intellect takes

## XX

Some translators and commentators construe these words beginning with “**And we ...**” to be those of the queen herself, since there is no explicit mention of a second speaker in this verse.

But Ibnu Kathīr and his sources are in no doubt that this second speech belongs to Sulaimān (peace be upon him) given that 1) there is no indication prior to this of her having received **the knowledge**; 2) the third-person pronoun **her** (or **it** for feminine nouns) has no obvious referent besides the queen herself; and 3) her speech of submission is reserved for the last verse in this narrative, namely **Q27:44**, where it provides a resounding and satisfactory conclusion that would be practically pointless if her submission had already occurred at some indefinite time not even mentioned in an earlier passage.

authority, and remains bewildered. (From this is derived the Islamic conception of legitimate political power – appointment by an authority rather than ‘running’ for office, with divine knowledge preceding and conditioning worldly authority.) This explains why he called upon her to submit from the outset; he wanted her to participate in the same experience of wisdom and gratitude that had come to him by means of submission to GOD. The queen has yet to express her submission, but she has begun to see, through this lesson of the altered throne, why she should. So what is this knowledge that Sulaimān already had through submission, and hopes that she might have now by saying **As if it were**?

The queen’s altered throne is the Qur’ān’s version of the philosophical conundrum commonly known as the ‘ship of Theseus.’

The ship wherein Theseus and the youth of Athens returned had thirty oars, and was preserved by the Athenians down even to the time of Demetrius Phalereus, for they took away the old planks as they decayed, putting in new and stronger timber in their place, in-somuch that this ship became a standing example among the philosophers, for the logical question of things that grow; one side holding that the ship remained the same, and the other contending that it was not the same.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Plutarch, *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans, Great Books of the Western World*, vol. 14, page 8.

The question posed to the queen, then, is: Has your throne maintained its identity or lost it? It has obviously undergone some change. Can it be considered the same thing or not?

The throne has two aspects: its material nature as a thing, and its symbolic meaning, namely authority. If the queen says, ‘That is not my throne,’ she would be emphasizing its authority, which should not change, over its thingness, its mutability. Her throne is clearly still a thing, as is the sun she worships, but she would be trying to limit the loss of her authority by minimizing the possibility of its being transported and altered. Consequently, her authority would be severely limited in scope to one place and one time, namely where she left her throne and when she left it, and the contradiction between its actually being a thing and her refusal to admit change would be clear and recurrent.

Alternatively, she could say, ‘Yes, that is my throne,’ emphasizing its thingness, which is obvious, over its authority. Her legitimacy would be impaired by accepting its mutability and consequent loss of integrity, but she would at least be a credible witness to what things are, namely changeable. Once again, a contradiction would arise, this time between her throne’s status as a mutable thing and the need for a constantly reliable authority.

The queen cleverly avoids taking either position. She neither affirms nor denies, but simply admits the resemblance: **As if it were**. She remains in suspense between two contradictions, both of which are occasioned by the conflict between what things are – changeable – and what authority entails – lasting, or even everlasting, integrity. It is recognition of this dilemma that prompts Sulaimān (peace be upon him) to speak of his prior knowledge regarding this same issue – the incompatibility between the phenomenal realm and the true legitimacy that comes to him by submission to GOD.

(43)

وَصَدَّهَا مَا كَانَتْ تَعْبُدُ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ إِنَّهَا كَانَتْ مِنْ قَوْمٍ كَافِرِينَ

“She was hindered by what she was worshipping besides AL-LĀH. Indeed she was among the people in denial.”

For her throne to signify anything truly important to the queen, it must have meant more for her than what it was by itself – just an expensive, elevated chair. It must have been a symbol of an absolute value, some divine quality manifesting itself in human affairs. There is ample reason to believe that her throne symbolizes authority, from which the power and

legitimacy of kings and queens are derived. This is why Sulaimān (peace be upon him) has it transported and changed, thus undermining her attachment to it.

He cannot, of course, transport and alter what she worships, namely the sun. The inference, however, should be clear enough: the sun, like her throne, is something that moves in space and changes over time, and is therefore subject to a higher power. But if the throne symbolizes authority, what does the sun symbolize? Suppose it symbolized AL-LĀH; could worshipping it then be justified? Why should reverence for anything be condemned if we consciously identify it as yet another sign of GOD?

Almost all religions have utilized this association of holy objects with Ultimate Holiness to justify practices that look like idolatry or pantheism. Educated Hindus and Buddhists, for example, assert that they do not ‘worship’ the images that they make, sell, enshrine, and bow and prostrate themselves to in their temples. Rather they believe that God Himself is present before them in those objects, since He is Immanent in all things, or that the images and icons and statues are there merely as aids to contemplation and devotion.

An idol or an image of a deity is just a symbol, or a form, which serves as the object of worship or concentration and meditation and helps the devotees to connect to him. When you greet a person, you actually greet the body or the form of that person. You assume that the body is the person although the person is hidden in the body. The same holds true in case of idol worship. Ignorant people see the idol. The devotees see the deity. It is a matter of perspective or belief. The devotees know that the ultimate reality is beyond the senses, beyond names and forms and beyond the field of Maya or illusion. They know that although the objective reality does not truly represent God, it has its own value and importance in our understanding of truths, in our worship of God and in our experience of transcendental states.<sup>25</sup>

In terms of ritual and worship, Buddhists do not worship the physical images that they employ, rather they meditate upon the meaning and symbolism represented by them. Often Buddhists will bow before statues, but this is understood as an evocation of faith and respect rather than an act of worship. However, given the emphasis

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<sup>25</sup> <https://www.hinduwebsite.com/idols.asp>.

on detachment in the Buddhist tradition, there is still an understanding of "idolatry" as the identification with or attachment to the physicality of an object rather than understanding its fundamental impermanence. As a result, it is considered a transgression to worship one of these statues or, more seriously, to risk one's life (or the life of another) to preserve a statue's material form.<sup>26</sup>

AL-LĀH is not unaware of this type of reasoning.

أَلَا لِلَّهِ الدِّينُ الْخَالِصُ وَالَّذِينَ اتَّخَذُوا مِنْ دُونِهِ أَوْلِيَاءَ مَا نَعْبُدُهُمْ إِلَّا لِيُقَرِّبُونَا إِلَى اللَّهِ زُلْفَىٰ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَحْكُمُ بَيْنَهُمْ فِي مَا هُمْ فِيهِ يَخْتَلِفُونَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَهْدِي مَنْ هُوَ كَاذِبٌ كَفَّارٌ

**Verily to GOD belongs the pure religion. Those who have adopted guardians besides Him [say], “We only worship them to bring us closer to AL-LĀH.” Indeed AL-LĀH will judge among them in the things they argue over. Truly GOD does not give guidance to the liar and denier. (Q39:3)**

By saying **AL-LĀH will judge**, GOD is declaring that His Judgement of the truth of such claims takes precedence over our judgements. We do not know what He knows, namely the true motivations and intentions of people who employ this kind of argumentation. It is clear enough, however, that the overall tone of this verse is disapproval, as excuses of the type cited facilitate rejection of the straightforward path, which is simple, direct submission to the imageless Absolute.

I call this tendency to theological backsliding reificatory slippage, a regression from abstract purity to increasingly concrete manifestations or incarnations – something that happens in all civilizations that lose their theistic focus in blooms of sensuality and licence. I discussed this before in Chapter 22, based on three examples from Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. However ingenious the explanations may be, such as those in the two previous quotes from Hindu and Buddhist thinkers, the common people have neither time nor capacity for metaphysical subtleties – they worship what they see. It is mainly for their benefit that religions are founded and scriptures revealed (while the philosophers among us manage – or think they can manage – well enough on their own). But most devotees,

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Idolatry>.

unless forcefully guided by clear theistic teachings reinforced by their religious leaders, tend to feel confirmed in their habitual idolatry, and soon do not give it the second thought it always requires.

This is why, in **Q27:43**, the queen is referred to as **among the people in denial**. State religions are not individual, intellectual affairs. They function as commonalities, utilizing a consensus on what their symbols should be and what they mean. Because of their shared nature, they tend to operate close to the lowest common denominator, the simplest understanding of the crowd. Without a clear prohibition, the excuses for crossing the line eventually move the line. This can even happen with Sufi shrines, where people may end up praying to the saints and forget GOD. If the *hudhud* mentioned finding **her and her people making their prostrations to the sun**, it does not matter what private, sophisticated rationalization the queen might have had for this apparent idolatry. Given her actions, regardless of her intentions, the people would see this as nothing but idolatry, and so follow it into **denial** of any higher authority.

Reificatory slippage is far more likely to occur if the starting point set up for the worshipper is already a thing. In all such cases, the fundamental mistake is to attribute godlike permanence to something that is inherently ephemeral. The Hindu should see “beyond ... the illusion,” and the Buddhist is supposed to be “understanding its fundamental impermanence.” But AL-LĀH goes straight past the suppositions to the actual situation: **She was hindered by what she was worshipping ...**

Fortunately, having seen the contradiction between its being a thing and her worshipping it as if it were “the ultimate reality,” the queen is almost ready to acknowledge the Unchanging and Unseen as the only Authority worthy of worship. She is, however, missing one last piece of the puzzle: self-awareness.

(44)

قِيلَ لَهَا ادْخُلِي الصَّرْحَ فَلَمَّا رَأَتْهُ حَسِبَتْهُ لُجَّةً وَكَشَفَتْ عَنْ سَاقَيْهَا  
قَالَ إِنَّهُ صَرْحٌ مُّمَرَّدٌ مِنْ قَوَارِيرَ قَالَتْ رَبِّ إِنِّي ظَلَمْتُ نَفْسِي  
وَأَسْلَمْتُ مَعَ سُلَيْمَانَ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ

“Enter in the palace,” she was told. But when she looked, she thought she saw a pool and bared her shins. Said [Sulaimān,] “It truly is a hall [whose floor is] glazed, from crystal.” She exclaimed, “My Lord, I have indeed transgressed against myself, and I have made submission [now] with Sulaimān unto AL-LĀH, The Master of the worlds.”



In Chapter 4, I mentioned the “dark room” of our internal life that defies our most determined efforts to identify and articulate its secrets. Consequently, as we saw in the story of Naṣrid-Dīn looking for his ring under the street lamp, we launch our search for those secrets in places where we are *wont to look* – in the domain of visible objects and concrete images. People have a constant, almost irresistible need to locate their gods where they can either see them clearly, like the sun, or where they can reach out and touch them, carry them, clothe them, and feed them, as they do with Buddha images, Hindu idols, and Christian icons and relics. Besides the psychic satisfaction and aesthetic comfort these things provide – a kind of spiritual snack food for the masses – I consider these false gods and pseudo-authorities to be projections of what we imagine ourselves to be. We want not only to have those absolutes of knowledge, power, and permanence, but we want to see ourselves and to be seen by others as having them. In other words, we want to be gods ... though we know very well that we are not (hence the incoherence of the confused intellect). But we can project our ideal selves onto certain select objects, sanctify and deify them, and derive some vicarious satisfaction from worshipping these ‘incarnations’ of our profoundly dark and impenetrable selves.

Delving even more deeply into our motivations, however, I detect a certain smugness, in both these idolaters and their detractors, among whom are the latest crop of atheists and critics of religion. The atheist says, ‘I am not so foolish or desperate as to submit my reason to an icon, or an idea, or anything that claims to have spiritual authority. I am a person, an enlightened individual; I am above that. And reason is my tool.’ But those who **only worship** idols **to bring us closer to AL-LĀH** enjoy a similar sense of superiority; they too believe that they are select individuals, enlightened by their exclusive relationship with an idol or deity that is exclusively for them as their belonging. They submit their higher personality to a lesser thing as a kind of divine condescension, an incarnation of their godlike nature in a form they can look at, handle, and yet retain as supremely theirs. They simultaneously look up to it as a god and look down on it as what they made, thought up, or chose as their own. And they constantly find it where they choose to look for it, under the street lamp of their own imagination. (Even professed monotheists can have this kind of degraded conception of God when He is little more than an object, an idea, or a possession by which they flatter themselves as superior to others.)

Such an inversion can take place because, while a throne may symbolize an authority that lasts beyond one’s own lifetime, one sits on it. You are only a temporary successor to that majesty and privilege, which will

remain in place after you have passed away. During your reign, however, you enjoy the complete illusion of being in command. You occupy the throne, wear the crown, wield the sceptre, issue the royal decrees, and receive the praises of your courtiers as instruments of your imperium. When Sulaimān (peace be upon him) discredited the queen's authority by tampering with her throne, he made her see the emptiness and unreliability of those symbols and paraphernalia of royalty. But he had not yet reached in to touch the source of those symbols, that core of egotism and self-worship that produces all our pretensions to rationality, grandeur, and godliness.

In this narrative, therefore, Sulaimān (peace be upon him) has no throne associated with him. Rather he inhabits a **palace** – a building which encloses him and all who enter it. In similar fashion, we are not invited to acquire Islam, the state of submission, but to **enter** it:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا ادْخُلُوا فِي السِّلْمِ كَافَّةً وَلَا تَتَّبِعُوا خُطُوَاتِ الشَّيْطَانِ

**O believers! enter altogether in submissiveness and follow not the footsteps of the Devil. (Q2:208)**

The palace, like Islam, is not something we can dominate or use; rather it overawes us by its beauty and the grandeur that surrounds us.

The queen enters with all the dignity and magnificence she can muster under these circumstances. Unexpectedly, however, she sees that she will have to wade through a pool of water. A water-soaked gown would be a clumsy, embarrassing hindrance to a proper regal gait, and so she lifts her dress. In doing so, she reveals her lack of knowledge and vision. She fails to see the stable glass above the unstable water because she considers the invisible to be nonexistent.

By taking this ordinary precaution to keep her dress dry, the queen's confused intellect admits that she expects to be immersed in the changing, inconstant water of this world, the realm of things, and to be impeded, if not dragged down, by it. Our natural tendency (*fiṭrah*) is to avoid getting engrossed with things, for our true nature belongs to GOD, the Everlasting, the Knowing. The queen, embarrassed by her *faux pas* and her exposure, has by this momentary lesson been made to see 1) the folly of her devotion to what she in fact seeks to avoid, and 2) who she truly is when granted self-awareness. The glass reveals that she can virtually walk on water, that is, separate herself and her authority from that immersive domain below. (The worshippers of this world, contrarily, encourage and celebrate this immersion and changefulness, for they are in denial of any higher realm.)

Water has its place within the palace of Islam, and the life of this world (*al-hayātud-dunyā*) indeed requires it. This is why Paradise is described as having rivers flowing beneath it; they represent the undercurrents that both remind us of our past and help us see why outgrowing that transience is forever delightful. But the failure to see the reality of the glass above the water of this world is ultimately fatal; like the people of Nūḥ (peace be upon him) and the army of Fir'aun, we drown in the floods of our ignorance, or are swept away, if we lack faith in a higher Reality.

The confused intellect is unprepared for that loftier, spiritual dimension – the crystalline floor of GOD's Kingdom. With the perspective of the active intellect, we are able to stand firmly on it and step forward confidently (as in the **truthful footing with their Lord** of Q10:2), while seeing even more clearly than before what water is, how it moves ("made to flow" as per Ibnī Kathīr's commentary), and how it submerges those who have no higher ground to save them from it. This incident reveals not only that Sulaimān (peace be upon him) has a kingdom and authority greater than the queen's, but that his knowledge is greater and more reliable as well. Her throne was transformed, but not destroyed; now she too has been guided, transformed, and yet remains a queen. She has lost nothing but her illusions, and has gained the security and awareness she has long wanted, long before she complained about what the kings of this world do to worldly kingdoms. She repents of the harm she was doing herself and instantly and gladly submits to The King of kings, The Creator and Sustainer of all worlds above and below, and The Real Source of Power, Authority, and Wisdom.

By this acceptance, she has attained the same level of understanding enjoyed by Sulaimān (peace be upon him) himself, which is why she does not simply announce her submission to AL-LĀH but specifies that it is **with Sulaimān**. Implied in this are the three stages of the developing soul mentioned in the Qur'ān.

The first is the inciting or commanding soul: **And I do not absolve myself of sin. Indeed the self incites to wickedness, except for that on which my Lord has mercy. (Q12:53)** This represents the confused intellect described earlier by the *hudhud*: **Satan had adorned their acts for them and led them off the path so they would have no guidance / [Telling them] not to make prostration to AL-LĀH.** When we follow our desires regardless of what is right or true, in ignorance or denial of GOD, we are headed to **wickedness**, despite our protestations of innocence and positive self-talk, and the devil is the driver.

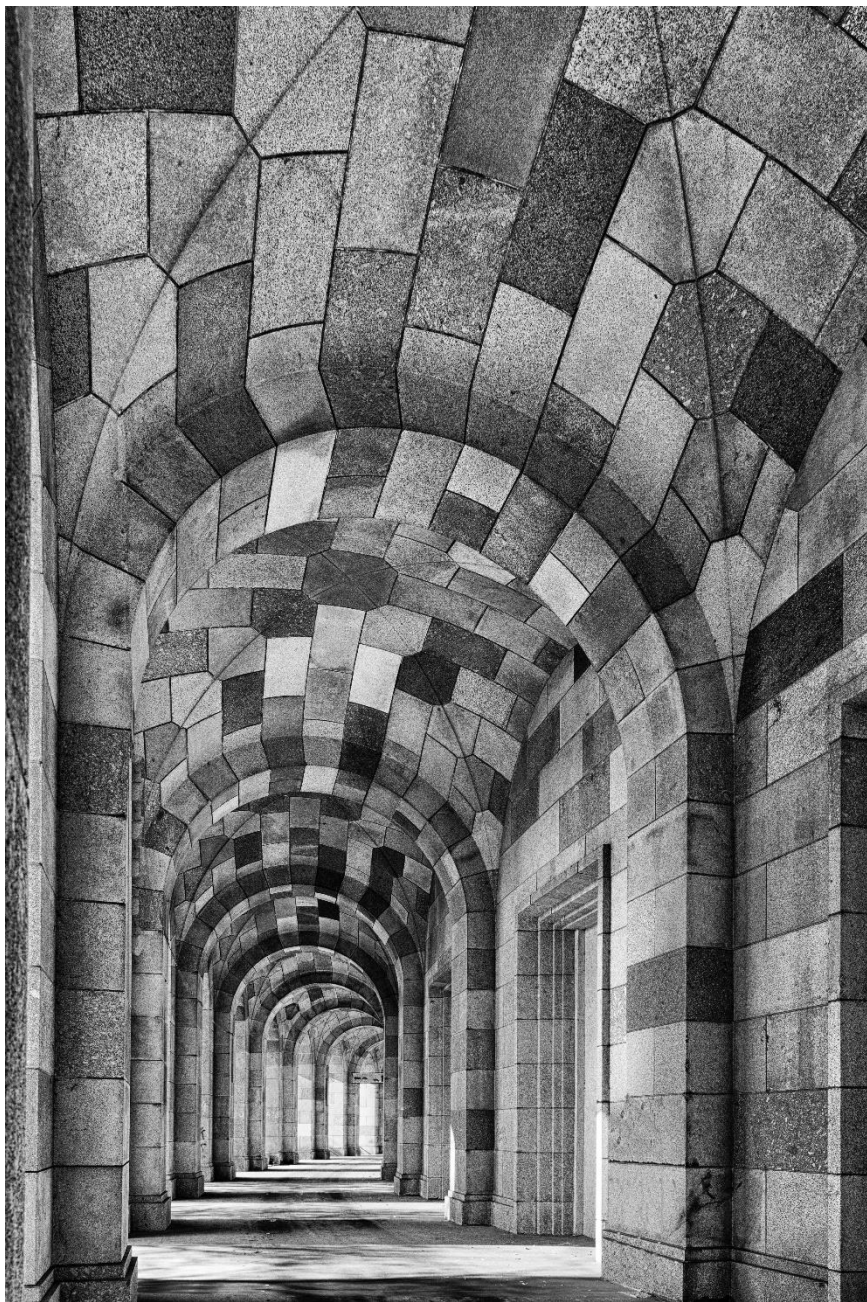
The second is the accusing soul:

لَا أَقْسِمُ بِيَوْمِ الْقِيَامَةِ  
وَلَا أَقْسِمُ بِالنَّفْسِ اللَّوَّامَةِ

**No, I swear by Resurrection Day / And no, I swear by the accusing self. (Q75:2)**

On **Resurrection Day** we witness the raising of the inciting self, which is then judged not only by GOD but by its own conscience. As the chief weapon of **the accusing self**, the conscience ‘resurrects’ the misdeeds of the inciting self. Without such exposure the confused intellect would never learn that **I have indeed transgressed against myself**. It is the task of Sulaimān (peace be upon him) to represent this investigative effort, examples of which we have seen in this story when he was interrogating the *hudhud* and threatening the queen herself. Yet this severity indicates a conflict and division within the soul – one that the active intellect is determined to overcome.

Thirdly we have the tranquil soul: **O you tranquil soul! / Return to your Lord, satisfied and satisfying! / Enter in among My servants. / Enter in My Paradise. (Q89:27–30)** Finally, after the tribulations of examination and punishment, we have reconciliation, internal and external harmony, and eternal victory. Here is the real meaning of the queen submitting **with Sulaimān unto AL-LĀH, The Master of the worlds**. She is no longer confused, and Sulaimān (peace be upon him) has nothing more to do or say by way of action or accusation. The active intellect has absorbed and pacified the experiences, talents, and possessions of the previously confused intellect in its greater kingdom, one that is fully submissive and open to the Kingdom of the Real, and our story ends where it began, in glorification of GOD.



*Photography:*  
Alex Vandenhirtz

## 40.

### FOURTH SYNOPSIS



82. Tragedy and adversity are not obstacles, but rather openings, to finding GOD before we die.
83. We find Him when we realize how great 'We' (the Seeker and the Sought) are when 'I' am lost.
84. This realization 'saves' Us for a higher form of Life, symbolized by the Garden.
85. Faith, the active cultivation or exercise of this higher Life, is the primary concern of the Qur'ān.
86. Our faith in GOD represents our fitness for Him. Religions are facilities to promote that fitness.
87. Submission (i.e., Islam) is the building code He has prescribed to facilitate complete faith in Him.
88. But His Infinite Justice and Compassion always elevate true faith over mere religious adherence.
89. Evolutionary ethics explains religion as a strategy derived from another kind of fitness – survival.
90. Survival, however, is just a fact, unable to explain the values (e.g., truth) informing our universe.
91. Science aims to reduce everything to ones and zeroes. Values always point upwards ... to GOD.
92. Religion works as a unifier of values to become our personal and social interface with Reality.
93. Religion both describes the values we have and prescribes the values we need for lasting success.
94. It thus must be practical and flexible while also fulfilling our hunger for the meaningful and ideal.
95. The lure of scientism consists in its showing us what is easiest and most reassuring to see.
96. But the yearning to see is an inner, immaterial quest, and nothing external will satisfy it.

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97. Experiences, the raw subjective element in our lives, precede facts, and reveal a Light within.
  98. The work of this Light is conveyed analogically in the parable of Sulaimān (in the 27th *Sūrah*).
  99. As the active intellect, he commands forces that explore knowledge, parse it, and then integrate it.
  100. The purpose of this life-long campaign is not ant-like survival but gratitude and service to GOD.
  101. Within each soul is a devilish realm of ambiguity and incoherence that must be faced and mastered.
  102. Ruling over this kingdom of shadows is the confused intellect, with its own façade of authority.
  103. This counterfeit throne, like scientism today, is based on the love of power, wealth, and comfort.
  104. The active intellect must conquer these passions and dispel the ignorance they present as noble.
  105. Severe determination is required for this, but calm and careful demonstration is most effective.
  106. When the confused intellect sees the contradictions in its claims, the way to submission is open.
  107. Resistance to Divine Guidance arises from a gradual attachment to things – reificatory slippage.
  108. By entering the Palace of Truth, we rise above the flow of things to spiritual unity and peace.

# ONE

*The holy depth of Personhood is what makes everyone a 'one,'  
A single Spirit painting silent Love in tongues of veiled light  
By breaking down that blinding white into the hues that hew our sight –  
An Indivisible Who speaks, Whose spokes are visibly outspun.*

*No tongue can tell a tale that has nowhere to turn, nor start, nor cease.  
No heart can hold, nor mind depict, the All encoiled in this Now.  
There is no separate space from which to see, nor time to gather how  
This One is not a number meant for measure, limit, or increase.*

*The cosmic order under this unchanging gaze is but a blink,  
A filmy glare, a glint, a blur, a daydreamed dozen billion years  
In length, just long enough to wipe away the blood and dust and tears  
And find our lifelong thoughts were but one thought, our lives  
what One might think.*

*There is no like to This, for likes are lifeless lies to Love, whose rays  
So fully clothe our nothings in the raiments of the Real that we take  
Those glistening images as facts, repeat that love till we awake ...  
**To join the choirs of voices woven into One, for One, with praise!***



## THE REALITY OF WORDS



What is real?

Each of us is born with a particular version of reality ready-made for us – one that we, in time, will either fashion to fit our particular circumstances or, if we are determined enough, will attempt to refine, revise, or replace.

As a soul sent down into this world, on the planet Earth, in North America, in the latter part of the twentieth century, I imbibed from my parents and early education a particularly pure and powerful strain of Anglocentric, secular materialism that has been metastasizing until today as it continues to dominate and marginalize other cultures' world views. I doubt that I can ever completely purge it from my psyche, despite my feeble efforts in this book. I firmly believe in GOD's Justice, however, and therefore trust in the Wisdom that assigned me this place and time in His cosmos so that I may strive to overcome the obstacles He deliberately set before me and inside me.

I have personally encountered other versions of reality – all of them, however, 'infected' by the same Western materialism that I am struggling against – in Indonesia, India, and Thailand, and have read enough about many other cultures, both present and past, to recognize the immense variety of human perspectives on what is real. It would be well worth discussing, if only briefly, some of those other viewpoints, but there are plenty of historians and anthropologists who are better qualified to describe them at length. All I can do is mention in passing, by way of example, the kinds of reality that one could expect from a housewife in Kyushu worshipping at her household shrine 100 years ago, an old Sikh warrior who, 200 years ago, was still telling tales of his exploits in the Punjab, a Kyrgyz woman abducted 400 years ago at the local market to become the bride of a rich merchant, a Greek shepherd forced from his home on the island of Chios 800 years ago, a humble Donatist nun serving the poor in a village outside Carthage 1,600 years ago, a young man slowly dying from his work in a Cornwall tin mine 3,200 years ago, a Nahua *shamanka*

negotiating the spiritual path in a peyote-induced trance 6,400 years ago, and so on and on, back in time, through all the countless experiences of reality encountered by our predecessors. The vast diversity of realities they encountered is utterly beyond our comprehension.

And that is only a microscopic sliver of the realities that have been felt, at some level or another, by the unimaginable variety of living beings on our planet since its birth, billions of years ago. What about the world of a bonobo, a dolphin, an emu, an alligator, a herring, a wasp, a prawn, an earthworm, a trilobite, a paramecium from a billion years ago, or a micro-organism struggling against the odds to survive on Mars two billion years ago? And then consider how immense our galaxy is, and how much life there could be in it ... multiplied by the 125 billion galaxies in the observable universe. And what if we extended our scope of reality to worlds not actually experienced but nonetheless ‘present’ in some form or another to every subatomic particle and vibration that has ever existed or will exist? Can we grasp all of them in any meaningful way? Of course not. But they are undeniably there nonetheless.

Each reality, no matter how minuscule, may be called a world (like a domain in information science). A world is an assembly of things and/or experiences rooted in or related to one viewpoint, regardless of that point’s level of consciousness or importance. I have my world, which comprises all that was, is, or will be sensed or mentally contacted by me, even in sleep or subconsciously, or that ‘touches’ me in some way, such as a wisdom tooth from fifty years ago, all the cells in my body at this moment, or the pain I will feel a few moments before death. A single electron, ten billion light years from here, has its world, namely everything with which it interacts. And GOD, **The Master of the worlds** (in the first complete sentence of the **Qur’ān (1:2)**), has His master frame or meta-narrative – the Reality that encompasses all our heavily redacted versions of reality.

At the level of Absolute Truth, therefore, the One Who names Himself the Real (Al-Ḥaqq in Arabic) is the One Truth, the Only Reality: **That is GOD, your Lord, The Truth. And what is there, besides The Truth, except misguidance? (Q10:32)** We find this Reality prescribed for us in ample and repeated doses throughout the Qur’ān, with every mention of **AL-LĀH**. For pragmatic seekers after short, neat answers – after which they can get down to the business of ethical living and worship – this profuseness of absolute affirmation is more than enough.

For those inclined to ponder, however, this type of assertion naturally prompts a question: if AL-LĀH is The Absolutely Real, The Whole Truth, and the goal of all our truth-seeking, then what about ourselves and our lesser versions of reality? Where are our shadow-worlds in His Unbearable

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In Chapter 25, I referred to our phenomenal universe as the mirror-world of objects; each object reflects the Unicity of GOD by itself being a unit of some sort. Unlike GOD's purely singular Being, however, the units of this phenomenal world are composite and ephemeral; they gradually gather existence to themselves, change, disintegrate with age, and then disappear. Despite their nominally singular status, they consist of smaller units, which in turn can be divided into sub-units, and so on down to the sub-atomic level where frequencies, relations, and 'states' can also be interpreted digitally, as units of another kind. Based on our modern conception of the atom, they are energy-driven clouds of probabilities rather than hard, specific points in space and time. They have both a referential unity – their denotation – and a swarm of associated meanings and relationships – their connotations. They are neither literal singularity nor an unlimited expanse devoid of meaning.

If we take Reality to be a spectrum of intensity, with AL-LĀH being Total Unicity at one end (figuratively speaking, for He transcends even the conceptual spaces we are compelled to use when mentioning Him), then the opposite or farthest end of reality is what we might call the void, or nothing. By definition, nothing does not exist – except as a concept. Concepts, or the words we have for them, are what enable us to talk about nothing, or evil, or any of the privations of value or reality that we oppose to GOD. We can have a concept or word for virtually anything, including nothing, but this semantic free-for-all should not delude us into thinking that there is a thing to which "nothing" refers, or a thing that we call GOD. Things are the objects that occupy the conceptual space between GOD and nothing.

However great the universe of material things, the conceptual cosmos is immeasurably greater in scale. Why? Because it encompasses not only material objects but all other types of objects as well – the verbal, the mental, the false, the impossible, the merely possible, and the literally nonexistent. To every single thing, no matter how minute, remote, or insignificant, we can assign innumerable concepts without diminishing the Kingdom of Ideas. On this basis alone, I can confidently declare that our world – and, likewise, every other world – is fundamentally and overwhelmingly conceptual. Or, since for every concept there is, theoretically at least, one or more names, we might say that reality (other than GOD) is verbal.

يَا عِبَادِي لَوْ أَنَّ أَوَّلَكُمْ وَآخِرَكُمْ وَإِنْسَكُمْ وَجِنَّتُمْ قَامُوا فِي صَعِيدٍ  
وَاحِدٍ فَسَأَلُونِي فَأَعْطَيْتُ كُلَّ إِنْسَانٍ مَسْأَلَتَهُ مَا نَقَصَ ذَلِكَ مِمَّا عِنْدِي  
إِلَّا كَمَا يَنْقُصُ الْمَخِيطُ إِذَا أُدْخِلَ الْبَحْرَ

*O My slaves! Supposing all of you from first to last, humans and jinn, were to stand up in one place and beg from Me, and I gave each individual what he asked for, that would not reduce what I have other than as what a needle would take when dipped in the sea.*

(*Ṣaḥīḥu Muslim, Book 45, Ḥadīth 70*)

Since *what I have* encompasses far more than material things, a petitioner could ask for wisdom or virtue or faith, and be given what for him would be of immense value but for GOD would not even be regarded as a cost. The verbal nature of GOD's Kingdom is even clearer from the following verse:

قُلْ لَوْ كَانَ الْبَحْرُ مَدَادًا لِكَلِمَاتِ رَبِّي لَنَفِدَ الْبَحْرُ قَبْلَ أَنْ تَنْفَدَ كَلِمَاتُ  
رَبِّي وَلَوْ جِئْنَا بِمِثْلِهِ مَدَدًا

Say, "If the sea were ink for [writing out] my Master's words, the sea would be depleted prior to My Master's words, and even if we brought as much [again] to supplement it." (Q18:109)

In other words, GOD's verbal realm is so vast as to deplete the material realm (**the sea**) without itself being exhausted. Concepts are things that describe (**write out**) the things that are conceived in them.

I define a thing as that for which there is no ultimate necessity. An equivalent expression would be to say that things are contingent objects. They are not necessarily existent (*wājibul-wujūd*), which is to say they do not have the same degree of reality as GOD and whatever necessarily pertains to Him. Included in our world of contingent objects are the things going on in our mind or spoken out loud – our ideas, our words, and the like.

عَنْ أَبِي هُرَيْرَةَ قَالَ قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ كَلِمَتَانِ  
خَفِيفَتَانِ عَلَى اللِّسَانِ ثَقِيلَتَانِ فِي الْمِيزَانِ حَبِيبَتَانِ إِلَى الرَّحْمَنِ  
سُبْحَانَ اللَّهِ وَبِحَمْدِهِ سُبْحَانَ اللَّهِ الْعَظِيمِ

*From Abī Hurairah, who said that the Messenger of AL-LĀH (may GOD bless him and give him peace) said, “Two sentences – light upon the tongue, heavy in the balance, beloved by The Gracious – are ‘Gloriously Transcendent is AL-LĀH in praise; Gloriously Transcendent is AL-LĀH, The Sublime.’”*

*(Ṣaḥīḥu Muslim, Book 48, Ḥadīth 41)*

The weightiness of utterances is emphatically expressed in the following verses:

وَقَالُوا اتَّخَذَ الرَّحْمَنُ وَلَدًا  
لَقَدْ جِئْتُمْ شَيْئًا إِدًّا  
تَكَادُ السَّمَاوَاتُ يَتَفَطَّرْنَ مِنْهُ وَتَنْشَقُّ الْأَرْضُ وَتَخِرُّ الْجِبَالُ هَدًّا

They said, “The Gracious has acquired a son.” / You have come up with an abominable thing! / The heavens almost come to being ripped apart by it, the earth split open, and the mountains fallen into ruin. (Q19:88–90)

Words, in short, are things.<sup>yy</sup> We may not yet have the measure of them, but GOD already does.

yy

In Appendix 1, I distinguish between GOD’s Names, by which He names Himself insofar as He is eternally Capable of Speaking (*Al-Mutakallim*) and is inexhaustibly Nameable (*Al-Musammā*), and our words for His Names, which are what we write, pronounce, delete, and generally treat as transitory objects contingent on such actions.

How do we know that our words, which are created things, and hence at least as ‘real’ as their referents, have a greater scope (and thus in some sense are more real) than the material objects GOD creates? Because we have real names for ‘things’ that GOD did not create ... and He created everything. We talk freely about “nothing,” “evil,” and “falsehood,” for example, but these ‘things’ do not exist except as words and concepts.

To assert that words are things, given that not all things are material entities, should not be controversial. But the Qur’ān also declares the converse – that all things come from words. Consider these verses: **His Affair is only that, when He intends [desires] a thing, He tells it “Be!” and so it is.** (Q36:82) and **When He decrees an entity, He only tells it “Be!”**

**and so it is. (Q19:35)** Not only is a **thing** or **entity** / **affair** (**shai'** or **amr** in Arabic) brought into existence by a word, but its pre-existence – indicated by the **it** in **He tells it** – is engendered by a conceptual act: **He intends a thing**, or **He decrees an entity** / **affair**.

Things come to be by a word, and also cease to be by a word.

أَلَمْ تَرَ إِلَى الَّذِينَ خَرَجُوا مِنْ دِيَارِهِمْ وَهُمْ أُلُوفٌ حَذَرَ الْمَوْتِ فَقَالَ لَهُمُ اللَّهُ مُوتُوا ثُمَّ أَحْيَاهُمْ

**Have you not seen the ones who left their dwellings in their thousands out of fear of death? AL-LĀH pronounced, “Be dead!” on them, and then revived them. (Q2:243)**

وَإِذَا أَرَدْنَا أَنْ نُهْلِكَ قَرْيَةً أَمَرْنَا مُتْرَفِيهَا فَفَسَقُوا فِيهَا فَحَقَّ عَلَيْهَا الْقَوْلُ فَدَمَّرْنَاَهَا تَدْمِيرًا

**And when We want to ruin any settlement, We give an order for the opulent residing there; they do their evil there, and thus the word comes true for it, and We destroy it utterly. (Q17:16)**

Not only the beginning and the end of a thing are brought about by a word, but also its continuance:

وَلَوْلَا كَلِمَةٌ سَبَقَتْ مِنْ رَبِّكَ لَقُضِيَ بَيْنَهُمْ فِيمَا فِيهِ يَخْتَلِفُونَ

**Without a word preceding from your Lord, the matter over which they differed would have been decided. (Q10:19)**

Everything is written prior to its occurrence ...

أَلَمْ تَعْلَمْ أَنَّ اللَّهَ يَعْلَمُ مَا فِي السَّمَاءِ وَالْأَرْضِ إِنَّ ذَلِكَ فِي كِتَابٍ إِنَّ ذَلِكَ عَلَى اللَّهِ يَسِيرٌ

**Do you not know that verily AL-LĀH knows what is in the sky and on the earth? That is, indeed, within a Book. That is, indeed, an easy matter for AL-LĀH. (Q22:70)**

... and remains in **GOD's Book** from its occurrence until its final expression on the Day of Resurrection.

وَقَالَ الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْعِلْمَ وَالْإِيمَانَ لَقَدْ لَبِثْتُمْ فِي كِتَابِ اللَّهِ إِلَى يَوْمِ الْبَعْثِ فَهَذَا يَوْمُ الْبَعْثِ وَلَكِنَّكُمْ كُنْتُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ

**Those who had received the knowledge and the faith said, “You indeed remained within the Book of GOD until the Day of Rising. This, now, is the Day of Rising, but you have not been cognizant.” (Q30:56)**

The only difference between words as we normally understand them and material things is that the latter are cloaked in a degraded language, one that is literally harder for us to understand. When you get hit by a car, laid low by a disease, or die of starvation, your lifelong chatter is simply being interrupted by a sudden shout or a sentence for which you have no adequate response.

مَا يَنْظُرُونَ إِلَّا صَيْحَةً وَاحِدَةً تَأْخُذُهُمْ وَهُمْ يَخِصِّمُونَ

**They are only waiting for a single shout that seizes them while they are arguing. (Q36:49)**

People who prefer to deal with materials, with this hard, literal language from GOD, such as engineers, tend to consider all language to be similarly literal. Given the ascent of engineering as modern humanity’s predominant approach to reality, the figurative and poetic language of the Qur’ān is more often seen as an impenetrable problem to be ignored, explained away, or strictly denoted in one-to-one matches of word to material object – no longer as an opportunity to explore new openings of meaning in the clouds of connotation that constitute all things.

The Qur’ān was revealed in the language of a people whose pride, joy, and finest product of the mind was poetry. Muḥammad (may GOD bless him and give him peace) was raised up among a nation of bards and verbal connoisseurs – not technocrats and mathematicians. The Arabs were (and still are) renowned for their generosity, impulsiveness, and passion rather than their meticulous rigidity or minute calculation. GOD is entirely capable of precision; we have only to look around in awe at His masterpieces of intricate design. But He also creates with flair and abandon – profuse palettes of colour in His meadows and coral reefs, unbounded bounty in His schools of fish and rainforest fruits, and breathtaking expansiveness in His countless galaxies and the dark deeps between them. We should never let the neat conclusions of the actuary stifle the wild wonder of the artist in us, nor allow our grasping at closure dictate terms to the open-handed worlds of the Ever-Living.

Because our words appear to be as shapeless and transient as the morning mist, we tend to think that GOD’s words are also light and insubstantial. GOD can communicate by signs (*āyāt*) in that airy verbal style of ours

– hence the Qur’ān and the scriptures before it. But He also speaks materially, through signs (*āyāt*) likewise, and so clearly and vehemently that we take them as not just another version of reality, but all of Reality. In doing so, we not only discredit the power of verbal speech – both His and ours – but empty the realm of material speech of its meaning. We convert His whole words and eloquent sentences into our blunt numbers – a stunningly impoverished digital mock-up. Technically, we can do with it the kind of work that the minions of Sulaimān (peace be upon him) are described as performing – diving, construction, metal-working, and the like. But they are depicted in the Qur’ān as either *jinn*, made from fire, (Q27:17) or devils (Q21:82). By privileging their literal handling of reality over all other forms of interaction, we not only neglect our true human nature but endow ourselves with the demonic powers that falsely convince us we have finally succeeded. (Look around at our world today, and see the proof of our ‘success.’)

The first mention of Ādam (peace be upon him) in the Qur’ān discloses a higher, wiser, and more spiritual Reality – the one that GOD intended for us. It is a story that tells us of our origin, nature, and destiny, and the components of both our current reality and the Greater One awaiting us.



## ON SECOND THOUGHT



The eight verses that introduce us to Ādam (peace be upon him), the angels, and Iblīs (Q2:30–37) constitute the narrative core of Qur’ānic Reality. Despite its importance, however, this highly symbolic core is preceded by the first *Sūrah*, ‘The Opening,’ with its **seven oft-repeated verses** (as they are referred to in Q15:87), and the initial twenty-nine verses of the second *Sūrah*. The reader needs this basic preliminary material to prepare him for the ‘alternate reality’ embedded in those crucial eight verses that begin with **And [consider] when your Lord addressed the angels ...**

It is as if GOD is telling us, ‘You want to understand the origin, constitution, and purpose of this world, to see behind the curtain and discover My Grand Plan for humanity. That’s fine, and I will tell you. But what I have to tell you before that is more immediate and important. This Book is for the enlightened few – **That is the Book in which there is no doubt, a guide for those who are aware (Q2:2)** – and its verses are of no use to the denier (Q2:7), the hypocrite (Q2:10, 15–16), the inveterate doubtful (Q2:24), or the wicked (Q2:26–27). The knowledge I provide does not work automatically. You need faith, discipline, and self-sacrifice (Q2:3), plus devotion (Q2:21) and constant practice (Q2:25) – all of which are rewarded over time (i.e., the flowing streams) (Q2:25) – for these secrets to have their desired effect. Better not to know them than to be informed and then reject them (Q2:39). So reader beware!’

Just before launching into the main narrative, AL-LĀH has a vital point to make about symbolism in the Qur’ān: **Verily AL-LĀH is not ashamed to make a symbol from a gnat – or something greater than it. (Q2:26)** He says that He is **not ashamed** because, according to Ibnī Kathīr, the unbelievers who had heard verses referring to the analogy of one who lights a fire (Q2:17), or the fly (Q22:73), or the spider (Q29:41) found it ridiculous that AL-LĀH would stoop to such low verbal devices to make a point. GOD’s reply, also in (Q2:26), is that believers know these analogies to be true, (i.e., they convey real meaning), whereas the unbelievers are stuck at questioning the motive behind them.

But how does an analogy work? What makes a symbol true? Such metaphorical language can only acquire its right (*ḥaqq*) and be true (also *ḥaqq*) if it goes beyond itself, "transferring information or meaning from a particular subject (the analog, or source) to another (the target)." <sup>27</sup> So when the Qur'ān refers to itself as **a clear light (Q4:174)**, we know very well that we cannot consider the Qur'ān to be a light in a strictly physical sense; we give the expression its due by extrapolating from it a figurative meaning, attributing to the written or spoken contents of scripture some of the qualities that we associate with ordinary visible light. The Qur'ān is full of such targeted transfers of meaning, which are validated here in these opening verses of the second *Sūrah*, even more explicitly as metaphors throughout His Book, and by the kind of poetic, allusive language that GOD favours in certain contexts (not all). The proper task of the exegete is to identify these contexts and suggest, based on common sense and knowledge of the Arabic language, which targeted meanings are appropriate and which are not. But to deny this transformative power in His language is an offence to both *'aql* (reason) and *naql* (revelation).

The language of the Qur'ān is more or less symbolic depending on the subject matter. Just as the carefulness of phrasing we find in legal documents is not appropriate for the highly connotative realms of poetry and mysticism, and vice versa, so also in the Qur'ān we find a semantic range from explicit discussions of inheritance and penalties for slander to allusive topics that tickle the farthest limits of human understanding. The former type is mentioned in **Q3:7** as the *muḥkamāt*, the verses of clear and established meaning, while the latter type, the *mutashābihāt*, include whatever is indefinite, but nonetheless resembles things with which we are familiar. <sup>22</sup> The meaning of symbolic passages should not contradict the established verses, but can help to elaborate on and deepen their import.

#### 22

How can the Qur'ān be **a clear light (Q4:174)** and **plain Arabic (Q16:103)** on the one hand, and yet ambiguous (*mutashābih*) (**Q39:23**) on the other?

Qur'ānic clarity is of two kinds. One is stylistic and syntactic, and there is nothing else in Arabic that comes close to the crystalline lucidity of the Qur'ān. The other is semantic, by which a wide range of meaning is achieved succinctly. This is where symbolism and analogy are at home.

<sup>27</sup> From the entry in Wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Analogy>.

### ZZ (continued)

Rather than provide an elaborate disquisition on the multiplicity of divine attributes, for example, AL-LĀH prefers to use concrete imagery that is clear to the average reader yet also allusively powerful enough to convey a bounteous treasury of connotations that can vary in depth and width from one context to the next.

The 'Hand of GOD,' for example, is clear in the sense of being readily imagined, and yet is redolent with the many possible meanings that 'hand' conveys – power, care, creativity, generosity, et cetera.

Many scholars have misunderstood clarity to act like a simple equation of one word = one meaning. In the case of the 'Hand of GOD', the so-called *salafī* commentators know that 'hand' cannot be a physical hand; GOD does not have a physical body. On the other hand (pun intended), they gag at the thought that 'hand' can have more than one meaning at the same time. (Words having multiple meanings and various depths is something that poets know instinctively; for most engineers, however, this simply does not compute.) They fear that if we allow a symbolic meaning for 'hand,' such as 'power,' we are automatically denying what they consider to be its only meaning, and hence are denying the truth of GOD's Word (and so become *kāfir*). It is this kind of fear that has crippled Muslim intellectual advancement in recent years. Underlying this outlook, I believe, is a kind of subtle materialism that cannot accept that a spiritual entity, such as a meaning or a value (let alone GOD, Who is even more abstract), can be as real as a solid thing, such as a physical hand. Counter-intuitively, and without fear of anyone but GOD Himself, I affirm the opposite – GOD's Hand of Generosity, Power, Blessing, and Presence, is the original hand, of which our hands of flesh are faint, inaccurate copies.

The truth of the matter is that the 'Hand of GOD' is used precisely because it conveys both a primary image – one form of meaning – and extended connotations that enrich the depth and breadth of reference. Those who insist that the 'Hand of GOD' is a real hand, in a way that is unknown to us other than to say that it befits Him, and those who say that His Hand signifies a more abstract meaning appropriate to the context are both correct.

Here are some examples. Reputable *mufasssīrūn* such as Ibnī Kathīr have supplied various comments from the *salaf* to amplify the meanings that suit the verse in question.

**ZZ** (continued)

**(Q5:64) Rather His two Hands are openly extended; He spends whatever way He wills.**

**Hands** here suggests the act of giving, the generous intent, and unlimited capacity (like the multiple meanings He intends, open for all to find in His Bounty what means the most to them).

**(Q48:10) The Hand of GOD is over their hands.**

**Hand** here connotes the Sanctity reinforcing the pledge made with human hands, the Judgement that will enforce it lest it be broken, and the Divine Presence Seeing and Hearing at that event.

**(Q39:67) ... and the heavens will be rolled up into His Right Hand.**

**His Right Hand** here connotes irresistible Force, total Control, and rightful Authority.

**(Q36:71) Do they not see what We created for them out of what Our Hands have made ...**

**Hands** here refers not only to the Power of creation but also the Creativity and Care informing that Power. We are asked to look not only at the animals themselves but also at the Love and Wisdom that produced them, in order that we might find their real meaning with AL-LĀH.



One difficulty in contemporary discussions of the Qur'ān is that what was obvious and non-controversial in former times is not necessarily so today. Text Box K in Chapter 7 provides two examples of how our understanding of creation and humanity can expand as our scope of reference in time and space has broadened, thus introducing new questions and perspectives into the distinction between clear and unclear. Let us take a look at another pair of examples.

وَهُوَ الَّذِي يَبْدَأُ الْخَلْقَ ثُمَّ يُعِيدُهُ وَهُوَ أَهْوَنُ عَلَيْهِ وَلَهُ الْمَثَلُ الْأَعْلَى  
فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ

**He is the One Who starts creation, then – and what is easier – repeats it. In the heavens and the earth is His most lofty metaphor. He is The Mighty, The Sagacious. (Q30:27)**

At the time of revelation in the seventh century C.E., **the heavens** meant the seven heavens frequently mentioned in the Qur'ān, and which were commonly considered to be the paths of the seven classical 'planets,' namely the Moon, Venus, Mercury, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. **The earth** was understood to be either a flat mass of land and water at the ends of which the Sun and Moon rose and set, or, in the Ptolemaic system, a globe around which all the 'planets' revolved.

Our contemporary viewpoint is, of course, quite different. The Sun and Moon are not planets at all, and only the Moon orbits the Earth. The Ptolemaic system is outdated and simply wrong. The seven heavens were either mentioned so as to conform to the common assumptions of the time – in which case reference to them in the Qur'ān is obsolete as well – or, as I believe, they signify what was meaningful to readers of that time in one context, with their level of understanding, and remain meaningful to us today, but in a different context and with a higher level of abstraction. (This is yet another example of how the same word or expression can have different meanings simultaneously, for what is true at the symbolic level now was true in the past as well.)

References to the earth, likewise, that may have been understood in a physical, literal sense in the past have currently to be reconsidered within a broader frame. The travels of Dhīl-Qarnain in *Sūratil-Kahf*, for example, must now be interpreted rather more symbolically than before, given that he is mentioned as arriving where the sun set (**Q18:86**) and where it rose (**Q18:90**). Needless to say – but for modern literalists it has to be said nonetheless – there is no place on earth where the sun does not set or rise, making all places alike in that regard, and so these expressions require a certain latitude (or rather longitude) in interpretation, for example 'as far west as he could go' and 'as far east as he could go.'

If we ask, therefore, 'What does GOD mean by **the heavens and the earth**?' the answer could be each and all of the following: 1) a concession to the ancient physical cosmography of a flat earth and seven layers above it or the Ptolemaic system of concentric spheres around the earth at their centre; 2) a reference to our contemporary cosmography, physical and informational, comprising vast expanses of space (the heavens?) and our current (and only?) home planet, Earth; 3) a symbolic and multi-dimensional conceptual system wherein 'heavens' and 'earth' acquire their meanings from allusions in the Qur'ān – a frame broad enough to include both materialistic schemes in 1) and 2).

Many commentators consider **the heavens and the earth** to be the Qur'ān's standard expression for indicating the entirety of creation. But in

**Q30:27**, quoted above, they are referred to as GOD’s **most lofty metaphor**. “The word metaphor itself is a metaphor, coming from a Greek term meaning to ‘transfer’ or ‘carry across.’ Metaphors ‘carry’ meaning from one word, image, idea, or situation to another ...”<sup>28</sup> If **the heavens and the earth** constitute all of creation, then what else is there that this expression could be ‘carried’ to, and what entitles this particular figure of speech to be considered the **most lofty**?

From the following table, we realize that references to **the heavens and the earth and that which is between them** provide a template for a wide range of meanings in numerous contexts. These contexts interact like the **interchange of winds (Q2:164)** or the **fecundating breezes (Q15:22)**; they transpose the basic pattern of two contrasting realms into new fields, and bring back from those fields fertilizing connotations of what **the heavens and the earth and that which is between them** could be saying to us at various degrees of implicitness and symbolism.

VERSE		THE HEAVENS (AND THEIR ANALOGS)	THAT WHICH IS BETWEEN	THE EARTH (AND ITS ANALOGS)
1	And We did not create <b>the heavens and the earth and that which is between them</b> other than with truth. <b>(Q15:85)</b>	general meaning	general meaning	general meaning
2	... and <b>the clouds controlled</b> between <b>the sky and earth</b> are signs for people of intelligence. <b>(Q2:164)</b>	whatever is above the clouds	whatever has a cloud-like nature	whatever is below the clouds
3	AL-LĀH is He Who sends <b>the winds</b> to raise <b>the clouds</b> , and then We drive them to <b>a land deceased</b> , and We revive <b>the earth</b> therewith after it had died. So too is Resurrection. <b>(Q35:9)</b>	the winds, unseen but active as messengers whom GOD sends ( <i>arsala</i> )	the ‘message’ in the clouds, raised by the winds and sent to enliven the world below	dead, but capable of life and resurrection when watered

<sup>28</sup> From the entry in Wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metaphor>.

4	Have you not seen that GOD conveys <b>the clouds</b> , then gathers them together, then piles them up? You see the rain emerge from fissures in them. And from <b>the sky</b> He sends down out of <b>[clouds like] mountains hail</b> , and hurls it onto <b>whom He wills</b> , and fends it off of <b>whom He wills</b> . The lightning flashes nearly take away their sight. <b>(Q24:43)</b>	a scene of complicated, dramatic, and deliberate movement, and the origin of actions felt on the ground	clouds that God composes ( <i>yu'allifu</i> ) and organizes (like books), and mountains of hail in heights of complexity, power, and light	the inhabitants, objects of actions from above, namely hail and lightning, both of which surpass human capacity to use or absorb
5	He manages <b>the order</b> from <b>the sky to earth</b> , and then it lofts to Him within a day as long as you would think to be a thousand years. / That is The Knower of <b>the hidden</b> and <b>the manifest</b> , The Mighty, The Compassionate. <b>(Q32:5–6)</b>	the intelligent origin of worldly affairs, and the realm of power hidden in them	the order or affair communicating between sky and earth at two vastly different speeds	the recipients of the order, and the realm where mercy appears articulated over time
6	He Who made <b>the earth</b> a bed for you and made <b>the sky</b> an edifice, and sent down <b>water</b> from <b>the sky</b> , producing by it fruits provision for you. <b>(Q2:22)</b>	a vertical structure, the origin of life-giving water	water, that which is sent as the productive element	a horizontal structure, a place of rest and production
7	He is the One Who shows <b>His signs</b> to <b>you</b> and sends down from <b>the sky your sustenance</b> . <b>(Q40:13)</b>	the origin of signs and sustenance	what is shown (signs) and sent (sustenance)	where humanity is instructed and nourished
8	Or are you safe from Who is in <b>the sky</b> releasing down <b>a storm</b> on <b>you</b> ? But you shall come to know how [terrible] <b>My warning</b> is. <b>(Q67:17)</b>	the 'proper' home of GOD's immanence	what is sent as warning or retribution	where humanity learns, but with no guaranteed security

9	He is AL-LĀH in both <b>the heavens and the earth</b> . He knows <b>your innermost and outermost</b> and knows <b>what you are earning</b> . (Q6:3)	the 'general' home of GOD's immanence	deleted by GOD's immanence and knowledge	humanity's secret thoughts, outward display, and real results
10	Do they wait for aught but that AL-LĀH will come upon them in <b>the shadow of the clouds</b> , and with the angels, and the whole <b>Affair</b> will be decided? To GOD are all affairs returned. (Q2:210)		completely filled by the collapse of differences into one Command / Affair	

What do **the heavens and the earth** have in common?

- 1) AL-LĀH is Present, or Immanent, 'in' both of them.
- 2) They are both meaningful, because of that Divine Presence.
- 3) They interact or communicate with each other.
- 4) They were once united. (Q21:30)
- 5) They will be returned to GOD, suggesting a reunification.

What are the key differences between them?

- 1) They present a vertical contrast between high and low.
- 2) The vertical levels in a plurality of heavens contrast with the singular, horizontal earth.
- 3) The sky (heaven) is primarily the source of action, while the earth is its recipient.
- 4) The sky (heaven) has life-giving powers; the earth can be either enlivened by it or dead.
- 5) Man lives on earth ('in' the earth in Arabic); the angels are associated with the sky.

What are the significant characteristics of **that which is between them**?

- 1) The clouds in it suggest a stronger affinity with heaven than with the earth.
- 2) It is the medium of messages and orders.



- 3) It carries water in the form of rain, hail, and water vapour (i.e., clouds).
- 4) Compared to the heavens and the earth, its realm or range is not clearly defined.
- 5) When the heavens and the earth are mentioned, this intermediary realm is often omitted.

This whole ensemble of meaning is what AL-LĀH refers to as His **most lofty metaphor**. But what could be loftier, besides GOD, than the literal, created heavens? It must be the heavens of the order or command, the Word that overrules creation to give it a particular direction or meaning: **Truly His are the Creation and Command. Blessed be AL-LĀH, The Master of the worlds! (Q7:54)** We see it at work here: **Verily the likeness with AL-LĀH of ‘Īsā is like that of Ādam; He created him from dust then told him “Be!” and so he came to be (Q3:59)**; and we see it in the extended passage of **Q41:10–12**, in which GOD first **created the earth** and **then turned to the sky while it was smoke**, ordered it and the earth to be obedient, and **ordained the sky as seven heavens and inspired in every heaven its command**. Both the heavens and the earth are created, (i.e., are things), but there is an additional, verbal element of arrangement and command that distinguishes both the heavens and the activation of every creature (not only ‘Īsā and Ādam, but all things as in **Q36:82**).

We could say, in short, that creation is GOD’s basic language, expressed in material forms (**dust** or clay), and then superimposed on that is the effective language that empowers, enlivens, and directs, expressed in words, communicating a higher Reality that arranges, regulates, and commands. We see the same word, *sawwā*, used for the formation of the human being after his creation (**Q32:9** and **15:29**) and the formation of the heavens after His creative work on earth (**Q2:29**). One could truly call the seven heavens, on the one hand, and the spiritual capacity in man, readied for the breath of His Spirit, on the other, as analogous sharers in GOD’s inspired second thought.

With this framework in place, we can now turn to the Qur’ān’s first and foundational story of what constitutes reality.

43.

## THE SECRET OF THE HEAVENS AND THE EARTH



### ANTICIPATION

*From death to breath to death we move, unseeing.  
We do not lead our lives – nay, disagreeing,  
We must be led, pulled into life complaining.  
Each step reveals another gate remaining.  
So schooled to trust, we haply learn, before  
We reach the final door, to fear no more.*

Just before launching into His narrative, AL-LĀH strikes a note of incredulity (Q2:28) at the existential folly of those who reject Him.

كَيْفَ تَكْفُرُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَكُنْتُمْ أَمْوَاتًا فَأَحْيَاكُمْ ثُمَّ يُمَيِّتُكُمْ ثُمَّ يُحْيِيكُمْ ثُمَّ إِلَيْهِ تُرْجَعُونَ

**How can you reject [or be ungrateful to] AL-LĀH, when you were dead and He gave life to you? Then He will make you die, then make you live, and unto Him then you will be returned.**

Each one of us represents a reality greater than our experience of it. We came from a time before memory, by the favour of One we cannot comprehend, into a domain that defies all reason – life – and are heading for a loss that we loathe and a life beyond that makes no sense to deny, given the incredible one we have now. All this eventfulness and movement, and yet here we sit – unmoved!

It is as if, having occurred without our explicit consent and close control, this entire sequence is somehow undeserving of our trust, not to mention gratitude. The verb **takfurūna**, which I have translated as **reject**, also

carries the meaning of being **ungrateful**. Underlying this implicit dissent on our part is a deeper unease – fear of the unknown. Consequently GOD goes on (Q2:29) to reassure us of not only what He has already done with our interests in mind – **made for you all that is on earth** – but also what awaits us in other realms of which we, once again, are yet unaware.

هُوَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ لَكُمْ مَا فِي الْأَرْضِ جَمِيعًا ثُمَّ اسْتَوَى إِلَى السَّمَاءِ  
فَسَوَّاهُنَّ سَبْعَ سَمَاوَاتٍ وَهُوَ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمٌ

**He is the One Who made for you all that is on earth. Then He attended to the sky and formed them into seven heavens. And He is the Knower of all things.**

The higher realm, however much it may indicate some physical array subsequent to **all that is on earth**, is associated both with returning (Q86:11) and with levels of knowledge. It is to that Knowledge we must turn if we are to discern the outlines of the hidden reality (*ghaib*), or secret (*sirr*) of the heavens and the earth.

(Q2:30)

وَإِذْ قَالَ رَبُّكَ لِلْمَلَائِكَةِ إِنِّي جَاعِلٌ فِي الْأَرْضِ خَلِيفَةً قَالُوا أَتَجْعَلُ  
فِيهَا مَنْ يَفْسِدُ فِيهَا وَيَسْفِكُ الدِّمَاءَ وَنَحْنُ نُسَبِّحُ بِحَمْدِكَ وَنُقَدِّسُ لَكَ  
قَالَ إِنِّي أَعْلَمُ مَا لَا تَعْلَمُونَ

**And [consider] when your Lord addressed the angels, “Verily I am the Maker of [or am making] a deputy on earth.” They asked, “Will You make there those who cause corruption there and shed their blood, while we are glorifying You with praise and honouring Your Holiness?” He answered, “Verily I know what you know not.”**

AL-LĀH converses with all His creatures, and not only with a select few – the messengers and prophets, of course, but also with the mother of Mūsā, with mountains, and with bees, for example. With each group or individual He reveals different aspects of His Personality; indeed, one could say that the differences in what He reveals to them are what make them different. His first word to them – “**Be!**” – may mean something unique to each unique recipient.

To the angels, who are creatures of light, He reveals a particular kind of knowledge. It is the knowledge obtained by light, namely vision, and is appropriate to their natural home, which is the heavens (Q53:26). Hence

they can ‘see’ what humanity will do on the earth – **cause corruption there and shed their blood**. Likewise, it is because they ‘see’ GOD as Light that they worship and obey Him. But they also see that the Holiness they revere is in stark contrast with the apparent future of humanity, and so they pose their question, out of perplexity from this apparent conflict.

The knowledge obtained from visible light alone, however, is not the supreme knowledge, as I explained earlier in Chapter 36, ‘Under the Street Lamp.’ A reality based solely upon such light will turn out to be much like the scientism we are faced with nowadays – materialistic, superficial, inclined to see persons as things, overconfident, and grossly unaware of its own limitations. Through no fault of their own, the angels are missing a vital element that AL-LĀH is about to supply through another creation, namely man.

That they are unaware of this defect is evident in the way they phrase their question. They ask, **Will You make there ... ?** which captures less than half of what AL-LĀH intended when He said **Verily I am the Maker ...**. In Arabic, their inquiry takes the form of the present or future indicative tense – **taj’alu** – signifying the action of making or placing. But GOD’s initial statement contains the deeper meaning embedded in using a gerund – **jā’ilun** – which functions as both a verb, (i.e., **making** [or **placing**]), and a noun, (i.e., **Maker** [or **Placer**]). This is, therefore, not just a matter of what GOD will do in the phenomenal realm, which is visible to them, but also of Who He is, which is mainly invisible. He is not only telling the angels what He plans to do, but also expressing a hidden aspect of His Identity that hints at why He is doing it.

The previous verse ended with **And He is the Knower of all things**. The connection with knowledge is carried over into this verse. His first words to the angels are **Verily I ...**, emphasizing an essential characteristic of GOD Himself. At the end of the verse, speaking of His Knowledge again, He repeats this phrase, **Verily I ...**. With this repetition, one realizes that the first statement – **I am the Maker of a deputy on earth** – was also meant to express His Knowledge, but in the form of *verum factum*, by which knowing is coincident and identical with creation, or that truth becomes so by making it, a principle championed by the philosopher Giambattista Vico.<sup>29</sup> Every act of GOD is His Knowledge made visible. The knowledge in that act, however, is hidden by the dazzling brilliance of the act itself – **Light upon Light! (Q24:35)**

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<sup>29</sup> Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, Volume VI, p. 156

(31)

وَعَلَّمَ آدَمَ الْأَسْمَاءَ كُلَّهَا ثُمَّ عَرَضَهُمْ عَلَى الْمَلَائِكَةِ فَقَالَ أَنْبِئُونِي بِأَسْمَاءِ هَؤُلَاءِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ

And He taught Ādam all the names, then showed them to the angels, saying “Tell Me what the names of these are if you have been truthful.”

What distinguishes Ādam (peace be upon him) at this juncture is not the specific details of his creation. We are told in Q32:9 (and similarly in several other verses) that **He formed** [or **He proportioned**] **him** [the human being] and **breathed His spirit into him**, but it is clear from the context of various other verses that the angels and the *jinn* are also ‘spirited’ beings. The composition of man from clay and water is unique, no doubt; that uniqueness, however, is not emphasized here, but only hinted at by the phrase from the previous verse – **on earth** (which in Arabic is literally **in the earth**). Rather the reason for humanity’s distinction is explicitly stated here – **He taught Ādam all the names**.

The word **taught** in English conceals the very significant use of a word based on the same root – ‘- l - m (‘*ain* – *lām* – *mīm*) – as what is used for **know** in the previous verse and **Knower** before that. A more literal translation – but one somewhat clumsy in English – would read **He gave to Ādam knowledge of all the names**. The same attribute that characterizes the formation of the heavens and the earth, namely knowledge, is highlighted here as GOD’s distinctive contribution to man. If **AL-LĀH created both the heavens and the earth with truth** (Q45:22), then that assertion particularly applies to humanity as well, given that truth is not only something he obtained by being part of **the earth** but also what he was specifically **taught**.

This focus on truth takes on added meaning in light of His remark to the angels at the end of the verse – **if you have been truthful**. The implication in this is that the angels have unknowingly missed an important aspect of not only knowledge but truth itself by failing to see the special relationship between GOD as Knower and Maker on the one hand and one whom He has deliberately named as **deputy**. As a **deputy on earth**, man is being given a capacity that the angels in heaven cannot grasp – the power of naming.

Various commentators have offered their opinions on what names are meant here. By merely saying **all the names**, however, AL-LĀH is deliberately broadening the meaning of the expression to the maximum extent.

This intentional lack of focus is reinforced by the use of an ambiguous **these in the names of these**. It is clear enough that the identity of **these** is not an issue; rather the focus is on the general ability to give names to things. Why is this significant?

Naming is nothing less than the ability to manipulate reality. We like to think that reality is physical, and more like a solid than a liquid or a gas. It should, we think, be as stable as the earth we stand on – measurable, objective, and free of bias or point of view. Names, on the other hand, introduce all sorts of subjectivity into the arena of thought. Like clouds, they move and change, have depth and height, are vaguely defined, and act in ways that are unpredictable, are largely unquantifiable, and can be diversely interpreted. Names correspond to our own ambiguous character as humans.

We live in a world in which subjects master objects. The very heart-beat and lifework of the scientist is engaged in precisely this, namely mastering the objects of his observation and study. And for every object of thought he discovers or proposes, he must assign a name. It is by the act of naming that he puts his seal of human ownership upon it. This position of control has been assigned by Divine Design (Q14:32–33):

اللَّهُ الَّذِي خَلَقَ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ وَأَنْزَلَ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ مَاءً فَأَخْرَجَ بِهِ  
مِنَ الثَّمَرَاتِ رِزْقًا لَكُمْ وَسَخَّرَ لَكُمُ الْفُلْكَ لِتَجْرِيَ فِي الْبَحْرِ بِأَمْرِهِ  
وَسَخَّرَ لَكُمُ الْأَنْهَارَ  
وَسَخَّرَ لَكُمُ الشَّمْسَ وَالْقَمَرَ دَائِبَيْنِ وَسَخَّرَ لَكُمُ اللَّيْلَ وَالنَّهَارَ

**AL-LĀH** is He Who made the heavens and the earth, and sent down water from the sky to bring forth from the fruits provision for you. He subjected unto you the ship that it might travel on the sea by His Command, and He made streams subservient to you. / And He subjected unto you the sun and moon, continuously orbiting, and made the night and day subservient to you.

Everything on earth, as well as the sun and the moon, is made for us and subject to us (which does not absolve us of any abuses we commit). What facilitates that control? Intelligence – the capacity to name something, to rename it, and thus to ‘handle’ it in an unearthly place beyond the normal limitations of space and time. It is, as I mentioned in Chapter 37 with reference to the kingdom of Sulaimān (peace be upon him), the kind of dominion we all exercise in our minds over our thoughts. This godlike

power, given to Ādam (peace be upon him), was unlike anything the angels had ever seen before.

(32)

قَالُوا سُبْحَانَكَ لَا عِلْمَ لَنَا إِلَّا مَا عَلَّمْتَنَا إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ الْعَلِيمُ الْحَكِيمُ

**They replied, “Transcendently Sublime are You! We have no knowledge other than what You have taught us. Verily You are The Knowing One, The Wise.”**

The Knowledge of GOD is, at its highest level, but one knowledge. Those aspects of it that are granted to His creatures are like the various colours that emerge from a prism, whereas the incoming light is intense, undiluted white. In Chapter 15, I referred to the knowledge of the angels being only slightly coloured, as it were, due to their proximity and obedience to GOD and utter reliance on Him. Consequently, among all creation, they are directly cognizant in a way that most resembles GOD’s Sight, namely in an integrated, holistic manner. One potential feature of this visual knowledge is to see things spiritually, (i.e., in the light of the Divine Glory and Holiness). That feature is never absent from their awareness, which is why their knowledge is not a matter of standing around and staring like scientists in white lab coats in some ethereal laboratory, but rather **they exalt [AL-LĀH] by night and day without respite (Q21:20).**

They are therefore ready to go beyond the limitations of their visual mode of knowing, and to comply with what this new knowledge implicitly requires. For them, the creation of the human race is pure gain, for they acquire, through Ādam (peace be upon him), an awareness that would have been unobtainable for them otherwise. This is their introduction to verbal reality.

(33)

قَالَ يَا آدَمُ أَنْبِئْهُمْ بِأَسْمَائِهِمْ فَلَمَّا أَنْبَأَهُمْ بِأَسْمَائِهِمْ قَالَ أَلَمْ أَقُلْ لَكُمْ إِنِّي أَعْلَمُ الْغَيْبَ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَأَعْلَمُ مَا تُبْدُونَ وَمَا كُنْتُمْ تَكْتُمُونَ

**“O Ādam,” He pronounced, “Inform them what their names are.” Then when he apprised them of their names, He said, “Did I not say to you that verily I know the secret of the heavens and the earth? I know what you disclose and what you have been hiding.”**

The angels are learning from Ādam (peace be upon him). Can the same, conversely, be said of Ādam? What does he gain from the knowledge of the angels? This is not yet clear. We can observe, however, that

his origin **on earth** and from the earth – as he is so described in **Q20:55, From it We created you and back to it We send you** – will establish a kind of affinity with solid, earth-like objects that he will continue to regard as necessary to his existence. This is what naming does – it solidifies the named object, rendering it something that can be grasped by the mind (even though the name itself retains its cloudy attributes.) One might say that man was made wearing earth-tinted spectacles.

Naming works in two ways. On the one hand, it creates a horizontal system of classification in which various levels of reality – the divine and the bestial, the material and the abstract, the proven and the unproven, the simple and the complex, the good and the bad, et cetera – are all brought together as objects in a field where they are indiscriminately visible and accessible. Look almost anywhere in the Qur’ān, and you will see the word “AL-LĀH” jostling for its bit of white space on the same page, or even the same line, as, for example, references to homosexual acts, an old woman, rain, and fraudsters. This is the metaphorical earth that AL-LĀH bestowed on Ādam (peace be upon him) with the deconstructive power of naming.

أَلَمْ نَجْعَلِ الْأَرْضَ مِهَادًا

**Did We not make the earth a wide expanse? (Q78:6)**

أَلَمْ نَجْعَلِ الْأَرْضَ كِفَاتًا  
أَحْيَاءَ وَأَمْوَاتًا

**Did We not make the earth a place of gathering / The living and the dead? (Q77:25–26)**

On the other hand, this potency in language liberates the subject, the namer, from the sensory surface of what he names, enabling him to ascend to heights of meaning, truth, beauty, justice, and love that constitute the very pinnacle of human achievement. It is by their names that we gain access to the absolutes, those supersensory realms that irresistibly attract us to believing in and worshipping something, or Someone, greater than ourselves. If we are human, we cannot help doing so, and yet – by the supreme wisdom in this gift – we do so voluntarily. By naming, we obtain our only freedom and, instantly with it, the urge to merge its power with the Power Who first named us.

Both of these abilities, the levelling and the elevating, were beyond the range of the angels – one too low for them, and the other too high. (The scholars of Islam have, therefore, continuously debated over whether man



has a higher or a lower rank than the angels in the sight of GOD.) This two-fold capacity is demonstrated here by Ādam giving names ... to **them**. Since the angels have just been referred to as **them** prior to mentioning **their names**, it is quite possible that the angels themselves, collectively and individually, are included in the entities whose names they had not known until Ādam informed them.

This power of naming is nothing less than **the secret of the heavens and the earth** – a secret possessed by GOD and then shared with Ādam (peace be upon him). It is by GOD's naming things that they obtain their original being; Ādam is allowed to utilize the seemingly limitless plasticity in names to enhance or detract from that template of truth.

The angels were all about disclosure, which is why they did not hide their doubts about what Ādam would be doing on earth. But they had been concealing something as well – something of which they themselves had been unaware until that moment, namely their own unique identities. Your uniqueness is certainly present, but until you can identify it to yourself, (i.e., give it a name), it remains **what you have been hiding**. You reveal much of yourself by your actions, which humans and angels can see, but there is something in you, your *sirr* or secret, that only AL-LĀH can see. That is why we are told to fear only His Justice, which will judge our secret self, and rely on nothing but His Mercy, which will forgive what is defective in it.

The angels have now been introduced to the duality of their own exterior and interior aspects, the dichotomy in Ādam as both **one who causes corruption** and **sheds blood** on the one hand and a vessel of enlightenment on the other hand, and the bifurcation implicit in every created thing. It is this harmonious duet, this astounding interplay between **the heavens and the earth**, between what we mean and what we say, that entitles the whole ensemble to be named GOD's **most lofty metaphor**.

## THE TREE OF DUPLICITY IN THE ORCHARD OF ONENESS



Naming represents not only power and knowledge but also – and this strikes at the heart of nominalism – another kind of reality. Nominalism asserts that only particular things are real, and that names are ... merely names. The opposite position, realism, was famously expounded by Plato, who held that universal forms precede and inform their particular instantiations. The Qur’ān supersedes and transcends both sides of this debate.

The key to understanding this lies in the dual nature of names as both things and signs. Every existent other than GOD consists of things, (i.e., particulars), and the names for them are also things. GOD’s Names, however, are a special case. Insofar as they represent Who He is as their referent, they are not separate entities but figures of speech like ‘the Face of GOD’ or ‘His Hand.’ To the extent that they mean GOD, they are not things. However, insofar as they are words that can be spoken, written down, and otherwise manipulated, they are things – based on their status as phenomenal objects-in-themselves, not on what they mean. The same applies to values such as goodness, (which I mentioned in Text Box C in Chapter 1), beauty, or reason. Insofar as they are GOD-like absolutes, they are not things but rather metonyms for GOD Himself, and are the channels through which His Immanence pervades creation. Naming an absolute and intending thereby something other than GOD, however, actually renders it so, and thus it becomes an object, divorced from its original meaning, that can be discussed and dissected without any reference to GOD. Justice, for example, is divine in having originated from The Just, and to the extent we believe it to be so, we are witnesses to one of His manifestations in this world. On the other hand, if we consider justice as something separate from GOD, what we are naming is no longer authentic justice, and in that form it settles down to the same kind of pseudo-existence as all the other things we think are real.

This is the creative power in naming. By GOD's naming it, a thing comes to be, and without that name it only 'exists' outside of time in a kind of eternal potentiality, awaiting the Divine Word. The names originally assigned to things by GOD were not disclosed to the angels but instead to Ādam (peace be upon him), who gained thereby a GOD-like power that the angels were ordered to acknowledge by their prostration. They did so out of reverence to the new reality symbolized by Ādam. Whatever brings a reality into existence is essentially a loftier reality (and I say "essentially" because this superiority has conditions attached, as we shall see).

Nominalism is, therefore, utterly deficient, as it sees no higher reality than the things around us. The angels were not nominalists; they were engaged in worshipping GOD as Reality, not as just another thing. But without the knowledge embodied in names, they lacked the ability to see exceptions in a mass of particulars; they could not even identify themselves. One could say that they only saw universals, which is why they were so quick to generalize about the human race. For doing so, we might as well call them realists.

This leads us to the problem with Platonic realism. Every thing is not just one thing, nor does it have just one name; there are, depending on the complexity of the named object, an indefinite number of identities in any single particular. The particular is a manifestation of higher realities (identified by Ibnīl-'Arabī as the Names of GOD) in a specific combination that no one name can 'capture.' One name may be the main or proper name, but even AL-LĀH names Himself in various ways (though He is neither a thing nor multiple in nature), and the Qur'ān too has multiple designations. Each name has its own meaning, and each meaning can be reinterpreted through semantic linkages and symbols in innumerable permutations. So each 'single' thing dissolves into a cloud of 'worlds' of other things and names connected through various dimensions, both in it/them and beyond it/them. If this bewildering multi-world array of articulated distinction and redefinition can be considered sufficiently similar to the original theory of forms found in Plato to count as realism, I stand corrected.

Iblīs also took a stand – by not prostrating and refusing to be corrected.

(34)

وَإِذْ قُلْنَا لِلْمَلَائِكَةِ اسْجُدُوا لِآدَمَ فَسَجَدُوا إِلَّا إِبْلِيسَ أَبَىٰ وَاسْتَكْبَرَ  
وَكَانَ مِنَ الْكَافِرِينَ

**And [consider] when We told the angels, “Fall to Ādam in prostration,” but Iblīs refused with arrogance, becoming one of the deniers.**

The angels acknowledged by their prostration the immanence of GOD’s Power, Graciousness, and Knowledge in Ādam (peace be upon him). The angels had always judged everything on the basis of that thing’s action, which is why they had questioned the creation of Ādam himself – **“Will You make there those who cause corruption there and shed their blood?”** They had assumed that his appearance reflected his reality, that there was a one-to-one correlation between word and meaning, or between act and intention. Now, however, like everything else, the angels’ prostration became infused with a higher but hidden meaning, namely continued obedience to GOD in the face of His creation. The act of prostration became symbolic of the Divine Wisdom planted in the earth as GOD’s deputy, i.e., of Ādam himself. It shows us how in this world we cannot always judge by appearances, (i.e., the bodily ‘earth’) in anything. It appeared that they were worshipping Ādam, but they were not; the act was ordered and performed as a symbol of a higher meaning symbolized by but not automatically inferable from that act. In all things, we need to know the inner act of intention, which is its wisdom, its spirit, and its heaven.

Iblīs, on the other hand, found GOD’s command to prostrate himself to Ādam (peace be upon him) unfair and demeaning. He considered himself to possess seniority and superiority by virtue of his race, having been created earlier, and from fire (**Q15:27**). Unlike the angelic light, however, which gives itself freely for the benefit of man and the glory of GOD, fire cannot produce anything without first consuming something. It demands an exchange – a reversal of value, as it were. Because it cannot give without first receiving – contrary to GOD, Who always gives first, and infinitely more than He receives – it lacks the ability to transcend itself or see beyond its own needs.<sup>AA</sup>

Iblīs, therefore, could not envision the greater value or hidden meaning in the creation of Ādam (peace be upon him). He had been receiving the Light of GOD since his creation, and had been returning what he thought was an equal measure of service. But this command to prostrate brought him up to the limit of his temperament, and so he **refused**. The act of refusal, unpunished, produced in him a false sense of power, resulting in **arrogance**. And it was this attitude that resulted in a hitherto unknown state of being – denial. Essentially nothing but the loss of faith, where faith is simply affirmation of a reality, denial produces a new form of duality in the world and a new kind of creature – **the deniers (al-kafirīn)**. Their state is no longer one that is confined to the duality between word and meaning,



The first sentence in the Qur'ān (Q1:2) begins with **Praise be to GOD**, or, to be more precise, **Giving praise is owed to GOD**. This spirit of worship and service, of giving of one's best unstintingly, without thought of return, to the One Who most deserves that worship and service, is what distinguishes the angels above all other rational beings. It explains why they were willing to prostrate themselves upon command, without hesitation or doubt, and why their diligence and devotion are frequently mentioned as examples for mankind to follow. To forget oneself and one's needs and wants in obeying and praising the Highest is the highest state that a believer can attain. If there is any kind of transcendental unity between Creator and created, this is it.

or body and soul, or earth and heaven, but rather one that metaphorically splits the very heavens (Q19:90) ... engendering unmeaning, soullessness, and hell.

With Iblīs, consequently, duality becomes duplicity, and the shadow of unreality is introduced into all worldly affairs. A chasm is opened up in the body of created being, and deceit, hypocrisy, and evil come in to claim their pseudo-existence, acting as if they were everything, whereas they only survive by virtue of the good they commandeer and wear as a mask. In themselves they are nothing, and will be revealed as such when **to Him are all affairs returned** (Q2:210).

(35)

وَقُلْنَا يَا آدَمُ اسْكُنْ أَنْتَ وَزَوْجُكَ الْجَنَّةَ وَكُلَا مِنْهَا رَغَدًا حَيْثُ شِئْتُمَا  
وَلَا تَقْرَبَا هَذِهِ الشَّجَرَةَ فَتَكُونَا مِنَ الظَّالِمِينَ

And We said, "O Ādam, occupy, your wife and you, the Garden, and partake of it without constraint wherever you desire. And go not near this tree, lest you become among the sinners."

From a single person, Ādam (peace be upon him) has now become two. When and how this occurred is not made clear in the Qur'ān, although it seems, from this narrative at least, to have taken place after the act of naming that reproduced the duality of heaven and earth in all things.

Ādam is definitely masculine, but there are many verses that de-emphasize this 'masculine bias' by referring to the first human as a soul, which in Arabic is feminine. Here is one example:

هُوَ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ مِنْ نَفْسٍ وَاحِدَةٍ وَجَعَلَ مِنْهَا زَوْجَهَا لِيَسْكُنَ إِلَيْهَا

**He is the Person Who created you from just one soul and made her mate from her that he might take his rest with her. (Q7:189)**

A similar grammatical inversion of genders is evident in **Q4:1** and **Q39:6**. Rather than portraying the division of the sexes as a power struggle that can only be adjudicated by a constantly frustrated stress on equality, AL-LĀH wants us to identify with each other – man with woman and woman with man – as engaged in a common cause, from a common origin.

وَاللَّهُ أَعْلَمُ بِإِيمَانِكُمْ بَعْضُكُم مِّنْ بَعْضٍ

**AL-LĀH is most cognizant of your faith. You are from one another. (Q4:25)**

Together, they inhabit the Garden, a place of fertility, abundance, and diversity-in-unity. It is an ecosystem of absolutes whose synergy expresses the beauty and grandeur of the Kingdom of GOD in organic form. What is and what ought to be are intertwined in harmony. In this Garden, no absolute is at odds with another; there is no conflict, rivalry, injustice, or suffering, and therefore no need for restraint or denial ... with one grievous exception.

Duality or multiplicity in things is, in itself, not a problem. If I say “hand” has many meanings – a bodily appendage, power, care, and creativity, for example – my saying so does not make me deluded or dishonest. But if I say “hand” with the intention of concealing “foot,” or to signify an act where there was none, or intend by “hand” a material, measurable feature of GOD Whose Hands are incorporeal and beyond our power of conception, then I am lying, either deliberately or in error, and the shadow of duplicity has borne its evil fruit in the luxuriant overgrowth of the Garden.

Duplicity is a latent or potential quality of any duality. This is because maintaining unity-in-duality is not effortless, unlike the Unicity of GOD, Whose every act is effortless because His Being and His Act are One. Rather duality requires a deliberate act of will, namely the affirmation of unity, (i.e., faith), to keep its coherence and overcome inconsistencies. But that which must be held with effort can be sundered with effort, or dissipated by lack of effort. Iblīs was willing to exert himself against Ādam and all humanity (**Q15:39**), while Ādam (peace be upon him) lacked that resoluteness (**Q20:115**).

Corresponding to the devil's place among humanity is the one forbidden tree in the Garden.<sup>ΦΦ</sup> Contrary to the standard Biblical narrative from

### ΦΦ

The connections between Satan, the tree, and the sin of disobedience to GOD are far-reaching and profound. Here are a few of them:

1. Satan almost never invites us directly to follow him. Rather he poses as an honest adviser (**Q7:21**), and diverts our attention from him to our own needs and desires.

2. The object that embodies disobedience is made to appear inoffensive and appealing by its seeming similarity to other things in its environment. 'If those things are permitted, then why not this?' The tree looks like other trees; the fruit is no more luscious than other fruit. In this way, the moral enormity that should capture our attention is made to vanish in a mass of foliage and verbiage.

3. The tree, like Satan's promises, represents a kind of life and growth nearly indistinguishable from the true Life offered by GOD. As long as we are alive, that tree remains, and with it the ingenious, ever-new devices and technologies invented by Satan to tempt us to our destruction.

Genesis 2:9, this is never referred to in the Qur'ān as "the tree of knowledge of good and evil." It is simply the tree that represents denial of GOD or GOD's Command – an arboreal cognate of Iblīs himself. Just as he was a lone rebellious figure among countless hosts of obedient angels, so is 'his' tree but one tree among a virtually limitless forest of fruitfulness. If that tree stands for all that is opposed to GOD, figuratively speaking, then man must take a stand against that tree. No matter how many its promoters and cultivators might be, we must never forget that in GOD's Kingdom the tree of defiance is so vastly outnumbered by the groves of gratitude that a true seeker of GOD's Grace need never feel cramped by its growth or tempted to taste it.

(36)

فَأَزَلَّهُمَا الشَّيْطَانُ عَنْهَا فَأَخْرَجَهُمَا مِمَّا كَانَا فِيهِ وَقُلْنَا اهْبِطُوا بَعْضُكُمْ لِبَعْضٍ عَدُوٌّ وَلَكُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ مُسْتَقَرٌّ وَمَتَاعٌ إِلَى حِينٍ

Then Satan caused their fall from there and made them leave the state in which they were. We said, "Go down, in enmity to one another. On the earth you have a dwelling and provision for a while."

Iblīs is the proper name of one individual devil, or satan, while *Shaiṭān* is the generic name for evil forces. One could say that, just as Ādam (peace be upon him) was the progenitor of all humans, so is Iblīs the primordial father of all *shayāṭīn*, the plural of *shaiṭān*. The shift in designation suggests that Iblīs may not have been personally involved, and that this fall from the Garden was not immediate; who knows how much time Ādam and Ḥawā spent in the Garden before they had to leave it? In any case, the passage of time is not an issue here, nor is the particular means whereby Satan achieved his aim. That story is narrated elsewhere, e.g., **Q7:20–22**. But here we at least need to know what satanic element it was that **made them leave the state in which they were**.

Despite the duality that their creation represented, they enjoyed the freedom, freshness, and fruitfulness of a state in which opposites complement, entice, and fertilize one another. This was the beauty and bounty of being one-in-many when that multiplicity enhances the attractive power of the One. The Garden of the Real is like a tree – one life drawing sustenance from below and above, from without and within, and producing an abundance of entities – branches, flowers, and fruits – that all reproduce in miniature and confirm the fecund truth of their source.

Wherever the Garden of the Real exultantly reveals its capacity for contrast and attractive opposites there is, however, one growth that must result – the unreal. For every ‘yes’ there must be a ‘no;’ for every ‘Why?’ a ‘Why not?’ This is the produce of the void, implicit as a gap in the distinction between any two things. Creation is from the void – *There’s His Hand, where you are nought* – and thence comes its downfall. This is the mystery of the necessarily unreal, which Satan exploited to invent a semblance of reality – the lie. The secret of the heavens and the earth is not only the power of naming them truly; it also includes the power inherent in false names, in evil wearing the garb of good, in the name that has nothing behind it but the intent to deceive. The result, of course, is misunderstanding, division, and **enmity to one another**. The harmony and beauty of the Garden, in which words and meanings were as one, is forgotten in a long and miserable series of compromises with falsehood and injustice, and a seemingly endless struggle for **dwelling and provision**.

As I said before, reality is verbal – what GOD says it is. But unreality is verbal too. Satan’s job is to contaminate the one with the other, to confuse honesty with lies, until we accept that all names are ‘only names’ and that only tangible objects – the things that brute force and technical magic can produce – are true. When names are used indiscriminately, or laden with false meanings (as we see in modern advertising or read in Orwell’s



1984), then my previous assertions, that words are things and things are words, sound nonsensical and meaningless. In that frame of mind, when we finally turn to the Qur'ān for guidance, we get nothing more from it than words.

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فَتَلَقَّى آدَمُ مِنْ رَبِّهِ كَلِمَاتٍ فَتَابَ عَلَيْهِ إِنَّهُ هُوَ التَّوَّابُ الرَّحِيمُ

**Adam then received some phrases from His Lord, and so [AL-LĀH] accepted his repentance. Truly He is the Relenting One, the Merciful.**

In the Garden, humanity enjoyed a profusion of luscious, weighty meanings, ready to hand and clear to see on the trees of goodly words. With their acceptance of a lie, however, the outgrowth of these words became tools by which Satan could lead them to concealment and shame.

فَدَلَّاهُمَا بِغُرُورٍ فَلَمَّا ذَاقَا الشَّجَرَةَ بَدَتْ لَهُمَا سَوْآتُهُمَا وَطَفِقَا يَخْصِفَانِ عَلَيْهِمَا مِنْ وَرَقِ الْجَنَّةِ

**Thus did [Satan] cause their downfall by deceit. So when they tasted of the tree [of disobedience] their shameful parts were manifest to them, and they began to cover up their bodies with the foliage of the Garden. (Q7:22)**

Notice here how it is the leaves of the Garden, not of the forbidden tree, that were used for concealment. In the service of falsehood and deception, any truth will do.

Yet the original purpose of words is never lost to mankind, however much Satan and his minions may strive to hide it. The creative power of naming remains, and even its corruption testifies to that enduring power. Allied to that creativity, moreover, is the capacity to heal, to reunify, and to bridge the gap between Ultimate Meaning, namely AL-LĀH, and the words, both true and not quite true, that make us who we are. With certain blessed, GOD-given words or phrases, we recall the Garden where we began, allowing us to turn back (the Arabic meaning of **repentance**) and taste His Mercy again. It is by His Mercy, after all, that Reality came to mean not only the Speaker, AL-LĀH, but what was realized by His Speech – our own true selves.

45.

## CHALLENGING MODERN ORTHODOXY



Before I go any further, a table of comparisons may help to clarify how radically opposed Qur'ānic Reality is to what passes as reality in the media, the schools, and common conversation.

TOPIC	CONTEMPORARY 'RECEIVED OPINION' ON THE REAL	REALITY AS AL-LĀH SAYS IT IS
The ultimate attainment	Each person has his/her own version of the highest achievement, (e.g., truth, beauty, or love.) Each one is good. Communal, national, and global goals are all focused on some kind of materialistic development.	AL-LĀH (GOD) is the Greatest Good, always aspired to by us and never fully attained. His Forgiveness and Approval, obscure to us in this world, are the highest achievements for souls and nations alike.
Coherence or objective judgement among clashing versions	Serious or viable efforts to reconcile or explain conflicting narratives regarding reality within a greater system of metaphysical truth have been largely abandoned.	As the One Truth, AL-LĀH reveals a plethora of signs, both verbal and phenomenal, to inform us that objective, coherent, metaphysical truth is worth our faith and pursuit.
Truth and reality	Since no one monopolizes truth, the idea of many 'truths' has gained currency. In contrast to that, we are taught there is only one reality, which is based on physical science.	Truth and reality are basically the same, but their connotations differ slightly. <i>Al-Haqq</i> (The Truth / The Real) is one of GOD's Names, and the content of His Message as well.

Obsolescence versus timelessness	Science tells a story of unending progress, so the latest version of reality is always the most credible. Discoveries, news, and 'movements' render old truths obsolete.	Divine Truth is reliable, constant, and eternal, so while new circumstances and information may require new interpretations of it, the foundation of reality is unchanging.
Scientific reality versus spiritual reality	What scientific methods can detect or measure exists; all else is mere speculation or blind faith. The precisely quantifiable takes precedence over vague qualities.	GOD is the Absolutely Meaningful, and the absolutes that inform and motivate all living beings, including the desire for truth, are real in ways that cannot be measured.
Facts and values	The universe is factual, and valuable only insofar as it serves our needs, which are another set of facts derived from the Darwinian focus on survival.	The cosmos was first <u>conceived</u> and then <u>created</u> to reflect GOD's values and enhance ours. It continues to be conceptual, factual, and valued.
Priorities	Values are negotiable, but facts (e.g., survival) never are. Commercial, military, and media control over facts is thus more important than justice or truth, which can always be redefined to serve the priorities of the powerful.	Every fact has a value that makes it meaningful to us, and every value is expressed in facts. The Garden's original harmony between 'is' and 'ought' will be restored, and our faith in Divine Justice confirmed.
Freedom	Reality is something <u>we</u> identify, yet we are part of it. It is as if, somehow, we are greater than it by knowing it. Our minds have made us godlike.	Reality is Someone Who calls us out of nothing to taste His Mercy. If we choose a reality other than Him, He consigns us to it (for a while).

It is a misconception of the gravest consequence to think that this entire field of discussion is of no importance because it is not practical, but only theoretical. An honest reader of the Qur'ān will come to the opposite conclusion – that there is nothing more practical than this. What is real and what is true are matters of life, death, and eternity, in comparison to which

your so-called practical concerns such as home ownership, reputation, career, social life, and even your health and temporary happiness will soon appear trite and minuscule, if not delusional. Consider the following (Q10:54-56) as just one passage among hundreds like it in the Qur'ān:

وَلَوْ أَنَّ لِكُلِّ نَفْسٍ ظَلَمَتْ مَا فِي الْأَرْضِ لَافْتَدَتْ بِهِ وَأَسْرُوا النَّدَامَةَ  
لَمَّا رَأَوُا الْعَذَابَ وَفُضِيَ بَيْنَهُم بِالْقِسْطِ وَهُمْ لَا يُظْلَمُونَ  
أَلَا إِنَّ لِلَّهِ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ أَلَا إِنَّ وَعْدَ اللَّهِ حَقٌّ وَلَكِنَّ  
أَكْثَرَهُمْ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ  
هُوَ يَحْيِي وَيُمِيتُ وَإِلَيْهِ تَرْجَعُونَ

If every unrighteous soul owned everything on earth, they would relinquish it as ransom. And they would hide their self-reproach when punishment came into view. And justice would be done among them; they would not be treated wrongly. / Verily to GOD belong the contents of the heavens and the earth. Indeed the promise of AL-LĀH is true, but most of them know not. / He gives both life and death and unto Him you are returned.

Modern orthodoxy assumes a frame of reference that excludes these eventualities – the sudden exposure of hollow values, our panicked remorse when confronted with a pure justice that has morphed into Absolute Reality, our limited knowledge of this inevitable state, and our imminent return to it. Preparing for that Day is by far the most practical thing you could ever undertake to do in this world.

The Qur'ān is not constructed like virtually all books we encounter, including this one. It does not divide up its initial theory into tidy chapters with a predictable, plodding progression, and then rise to an exhortation to action at the end. Rather it ambushes you – **Verily your Lord is watching, waiting (Q89:14)** – from any direction, be it theory, law, prayer, practices, story, symbol, promise, or warning, at any moment, as if to say, ‘Don’t assume what the right order of subject matter should be! Wherever you are in your reading, consider this now!’ It is a course of training in alertness, a literary *dojo* where the master wants you always on your toes. It is this ontological, spiritual, and ethical urgency and pressure, and in an unfamiliar format, that many modern Westerners find disorienting and offensive. The Qur'ān, in short, was meant to be challenging – and personally so.

Shall we get to it, then? What are the challenges?

### Challenge #1: Reality is personal.

Yes, AL-LĀH is Suprapersonal, which means that He transcends personality as we understand it. But transcending it is not the same as denying, excluding, or ignoring it. Before we can transcend something, we have to be able to reach it. People have difficulty grasping how Personal GOD is, let alone Suprapersonal. Modern thinking, if it thinks of GOD at all, tries to rationalize the concept of GOD as some kind of intellectual object under the guise of being objective. But at the same time as asserting Himself to be the Truly Real, AL-LĀH goes out of His way, so to speak, to affirm His Personality with pronouns such as I (*Ana*) and We (*Naḥnu*), to describe Himself in human terms, such as His Shin, Hands, Face, Eyes, Throne, and Footstool, and to invite us to interact with Him personally. **And when My servants question you concerning Me, then truly I am Near. I answer to the call of the suppliant when he calls on Me, so their response should be to Me, their faith should be in Me, and thus they will be guided well. (Q2:186)** Our personality is what makes us ‘real’ and ‘present’ to ourselves, so it is only natural that the Divine Personality would be expressed in the Qur’ān with a similar end in mind – that we take Him to be our Ever-Present Reality.

### Challenge #2: Reality is reciprocal.

Modern scientism assumes the reality of the observing mind, the subject, and then goes on to interrogate the object of inquiry, be that a geological formation, a viral mutation, or a dysfunctional family. This is not a reciprocal connection, but a one-way street, an intellectual master–slave relationship within the supposedly impartial confines of the study.

For the limited purposes of an inquiry, that initial assumption is allowed to stand. But to extrapolate from that practice to the whole of reality is a gross example of the inductive fallacy, whereby particular instances are believed, falsely, to justify unlimited generalization. Absolute Reality is not amenable to subjugation and interrogation – **He is not queried over what He does, but they are questioned (Q21:23)** – and we, on the other hand, are not as real as we like to think we are.

Rather it is AL-LĀH, the Truly Real, Who invites us to participate in a mutual relationship with Him – the strongest dose of Reality that we can take, and our only means of ‘getting’ it.

فَمَنْ يَهْدِيهِ مِنْ بَعْدِ اللَّهِ أَفْلَا تَذَكَّرُونَ

**Other than AL-LĀH, then, who can guide him? Will you not take heed? (Q45:23)**

AL-LĀH is not only the Master, the Scientist, but also the Creator, and we are the creatures in His cosmic laboratory and the objects of His Attention. As Absolute Reality, He remains totally Free of and Independent from us. Despite all that, however, He does what no scientist will ever do with his lab rats; He expects – nay, commands – us to communicate with Him, to come to Him, and to remember Him.

فَاذْكُرُونِي أَذْكُرْكُمْ وَاشْكُرُوا لِي وَلَا تَكْفُرُونِي

**So remember Me – I will remember you – give Me your gratitude, and do not disavow Me. (Q2:252)**

Dependent, contingent, and verging on unreality though we are, He holds out to us a bond with His Independence, Absoluteness, and Reality. It is not something to be seized or even studied, but rather to be conversant with. And in that conversation, we find the joy of mutuality.

رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُمْ وَرَضُوا عَنْهُ

**AL-LĀH is pleased with them, and they are pleased with Him. (Q98:8)**

Challenge #3: Reality is elusive.

There is a constant tendency in scientism to ignore, dismiss, or deny whatever aspects of reality are not precise, measurable, and contained. The irony of this was not lost on Einstein, who remarked, "The eternally incomprehensible thing about the world is its comprehensibility." In other words, there is a mysterious pre-existing congruence in things, as if the primeval settings of reality somehow had the human mind in mind. We consign this odd coincidence to the margins of our thinking, where also lurks much of what is unknown – dark matter and dark energy, for example – obscure, such as the origin of life, and counter-intuitive, including the baffling reciprocity implied in quantum entanglement.

There are other terms we could use instead of 'elusive.' 'Allusive' is one; Reality does not just hide from us, but keeps returning to lob hints at us – more like 'hide-and-seek,' an invitation to play. We might also mention 'fuzzy,' as in fuzzy logic, and 'cloudy,' referencing Ibnal-'Arabī's term *al-'amā*, the amorphous, primordial cloud from which all created being was formed. Other useful concepts are 'non-rational,' as illustrated by

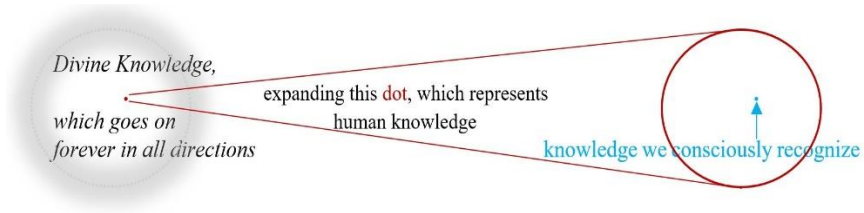
the assertion of Heisenberg (formulator of his famous uncertainty principle) that direct knowledge of reality is beyond the scope of science,<sup>30</sup> and ‘paradoxical,’ from Bohr, the physicist who declared, “If you're not astonished by it, then you haven't understood it.”<sup>31</sup> To all of that and more – and there will always be more – AL-LĀH succinctly says:

وَاللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ وَأَنْتُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ

**GOD knows, and you know not. (Q2:216)**

Challenge #4: Reality is effusive.

The supreme irony in this matter of our knowledge is that, although we know practically nothing compared to GOD’s Infinite Knowledge, we nonetheless know far more than we are ready to re-cognize. A simple diagram may illustrate what I mean by “You know the Absolute”:



Whatever information or sensory input comes to us has GOD’s watermark on it, but we remain largely oblivious:

وَكَايْنٍ مِنْ آيَةٍ فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ يَمُرُّونَ عَلَيْهَا وَهُمْ عَنْهَا مُعْرِضُونَ

**And in the heavens and the earth how many are the signs that they pass by, and pay no heed to them! (Q12:105)**

What we consider to be elusive may appear so simply because we have not yet learned how and where to look, as I explained in Chapters 23 and 36. If we do so, we will find that Reality is abounding in detail, astounding

<sup>30</sup> Lee Smolin. *Einstein's unfinished revolution: the search for what lies beyond the quantum*. (9 April 2019) London. pp. 92–93, quoted in [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Werner\\_Heisenberg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Werner_Heisenberg)

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/11/3-natural-mysteries-that-could-be-explained-by-quantum-physics/>

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Newton is reported to have said: “I am only a child playing on the beach, while vast oceans of truth lie undiscovered before me.”

in its clarity, and overwhelming in its sheer volume(s).<sup>00</sup> I say “volumes” because many of GOD’s books are written in languages that we are only now beginning to decipher. This flood of data is so enormous that we are obliged to select what will constitute our severely constrained sense of self and the framework of our

faith, as discussed in Chapter 11. That constraint applies to us, not to GOD.

It was originally conjectured, for example, that the 98.5 percent of our DNA identified as non-coding was ‘junk DNA’ – useless gibberish from humans’ evolutionary past. That was the first guess by a generation of slow readers who were quick to dismiss what they could not understand. More recent science now disputes that, as the greater intelligence in our creation has increasingly come to light.<sup>32</sup>

I am confident that as long as we are honest with ourselves, as lovers of truth must be, we will be continually “astonished” by not only what we did not know before but also by what we actually did know but consciously or unconsciously were hiding from our own selves – including memories of an Expressive, Caring Creator. **We shall manifest to them Our signs on the horizons and within themselves until it is apparent to them that it is the Truth. (Q41:53)**

#### Challenge #5: Reality is meaningful.

Because we normally only associate meaning with language, we assume that things obtain their meaning by the signs we use to name, describe, and discuss them. This, however, is an anthropocentric view of language, of meaning, and hence of reality. The Qur’ān tells us, contrarily, that all phenomena are in GOD’s language, and so everything is meaningful, regardless of whether it has ever come to our attention. Ādam (peace be upon him) did not invent the names of things on a whim or out of thin air; GOD taught him names that had existed, generated by GOD, before Ādam himself was made.

For something to be significant, (i.e., meaningful), it must function as a sign, referring to something other than itself. No thing, therefore, is meaningful in isolation, which is why even the universe would be meaningless without its Creator, Who is Absolute, Independent Meaning (and

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.news-medical.net/life-sciences/Functions-of-Junk-DNA>



not a thing nor a sign of anything). Because each one of us is also a sign of AL-LĀH, the basic meaning of our existence, individual or communal, refers to GOD and His intention for us, whether we intend it so or not. (In the same way, your ideas are yours, whether they agree to be so or not.) There is an immortality inherent in this status of being GOD's intended, for GOD forgets nothing and abandons no one. (There are verses in the Qur'ān that seem to say otherwise, but only hyperbolically, for emotional effect, as it is contrary to the nature of Absolute Knowledge and Omnipresence to be voided or undone.) Not only are we retained conceptually, as His ideas, but our whole being – physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual – is returned to Him in a total and final affirmation of a reference that, once made in all seriousness, is never lost.

أَفَحَسِبْتُمْ أَنَّمَا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ عَبَثًا وَأَنَّكُمْ إِلَيْنَا لَا تُرْجَعُونَ  
فَتَعَالَى اللَّهُ الْمَلِكُ الْحَقُّ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ رَبُّ الْعَرْشِ الْكَرِيمِ

**Did you believe that We created you in vain, and you would never be returned to Us? / Exalted is AL-LĀH, The Sovereign, The Truth [above such thoughts]! There is no god but He, The Master of the Honoured Throne. (Q23:115–116)**

Challenge #6: Reality engages in acts that are affecting and effective.

One could say that Reality is dynamic, but I need wording that suggests more than the concepts of physical science. What I intend by “acts,” “affecting,” and “effective” might best be expressed by the verse that says: **Verily AL-LĀH performs what He desires. (Q22:14)** Every fact (from the Latin *facere* – to make, to do) is the **what**, the effect (also from *facere*) of One Who **performs**, Who acts with affect (also from *facere*), (i.e., as He **desires**). We see His effects or facts all around us (though it requires special insight to see that they are His). Only faith can detect the Divine Feeling, the affect or value inherent in any particular performance as it affects us. The bond between facts and values, one that overcomes their polarity in every phenomenon, was discussed before, in Chapter 34. They constitute an example of that constant duality in things symbolized by the heavens and the earth.

If we emphasize only the facts, the createdness of things, then GOD is Independent and Transcendent; nothing causes Him, acts upon Him, or affects Him. But if we turn to the uncreated, timeless value of things, then He is ‘with’ them, and increasingly Immanent ‘in’ them in proportion to their value for Him: **Have no worry; verily AL-LĀH is with us (Q9:40); Fear not; truly I am with you both – I hear; I see. (Q20:46); and He is**

**AL-LĀH in both the heavens and the earth. He knows your innermost and outermost and knows what you are earning. (Q6:3)**



Viewing Reality as a Living Subject, the pronoun for which is Who rather than What, we can say that Reality is personal, elusive, reciprocal, effusive, meaningful, and dynamic. This is not how people normally think about reality, which is yet another reason why the Qur'ān is so difficult for the modern Western psyche to absorb.

If, however, we set aside the subjective spirit of this perspective momentarily, we should still be cognizant of how the Qur'ānic *weltanschauung* differs from contemporary versions of reality as an object of thought or experience, as a body. What is different about it?

Challenge #7: Reality is transmitted in many ways, including the mathematical, verbal, and pictorial.

At the threshold of the scientific era, it was Galileo who coined the motto of modern comprehension, "Measure what is measurable, and make measurable what is not so." Within the confines of the scientific method, this is impeccable technique. But such an approach does not reflect all of authentic, immeasurable Reality; it merely reduces part of what we see to a form amenable to our mental capabilities – an inert, colourless sketch, our product, rather than a living being independent of us. When we meet someone and, without a word, begin to measure him, we treat him like a corpse.

Words are greater than numbers. For every number we can substitute a unique and accurately meaningful word, but the reverse is not true. Virtually all our non-numerical words have wispy borders, like clouds; they change their shape and meaning over time, reach out in tendrils to other clouds, break apart and recombine. They are not clearly divisible, calculable, or logical.

While the laws of nature may be mathematical, our impressions of nature and reactions to it are almost always lawless and basically esthetic. 'Mathematical' does not even begin to describe what is essentially ineffable, that is, reality – an indescribable something that is, nonetheless, constantly enticing us to describe it. That interplay between the possible and the impossible, between the inexpressible and the articulate, between ecstatic, vociferous praise and awed silence, is what should stop us from ever saying, 'That's all there is.'

There are many more ways of representing reality than the mathematical, verbal, and pictorial. But these three have a special place in our intellect; they correspond to *jinn*, humans, and birds in the army of Sulaimān (peace be upon him), a symbol of the active intellect (for which, see Chapter 37). And while *jinn* may be better at technically diving into things, and birds at surveying things by sight, humans are capable of not only those two but are also uniquely gifted with the power of speech.

Challenge #8: Reality is primarily conceptual, and subsequently factual.

The belief in primacy of substance over idea is the legacy of Aristotelian ontology, and has bedeviled Islamic theology ever since Muslims came into contact with Greek thought. (See Appendix I for a lengthier discussion of this point.) I discussed the reality of words in Chapter 41, so there is no need to repeat those ideas here. Concepts are not the same as Plato's Ideal Forms, which seem to be fixed, lifeless categories; rather, as GOD's Words, they are nebulous, organic entities that conjugate, expand, multiply, and interact in non-physical, non-mathematical ways that all of us can 'identify' with. We are uncannily 'familiar' with their workings, but cannot always articulate how, as they are often pre-verbal.

Concepts are vehicles for the expression of values, which we could consider pre-conceptual, as they represent aspects of Who GOD is. GOD's values are the Absolutes I introduced in Chapter 1, and concepts convey them to us in the form of His Words. The value Truth, for example, is one of GOD's Names, a metonym for GOD Himself. Truth is also a concept expressing that value, and subsequently becomes manifest in facts.

The physical world, therefore, is a set of templates for witnessing truth in discrete, measurable form. The spiritual world is the Kingdom of GOD, in which what is tested and witnessed is no longer measurable phenomena, but what one means – one's values. All values should 'mean' GOD, that is, should lead to Him as their ultimate end and summation. He is the Whole Who makes values wholesome, concepts true, and facts real.

Challenge #9: Reality is vertically gradated.

When we talk about other absolutes, we expect degrees of purity, intensity, relevance, or comprehensiveness. We can speak of one type of flower being more beautiful than another, a decision that provides greater justice, or a forecast that is more accurate. So why do we insist that reality be 'flat,' in one dimension, either 'on' or 'off', like a light switch?

I believe it is because we have accepted the claims of scientism to speak for reality. In science, valuations, appraisals, and insights are rigorously excluded, and all facts are equal in the court of nature's laws. For the scientist, 'more' is a measurable quantity, not an amorphous quality. Values like lovely or more lovely have no scientific meaning. Consequently, scientism's answer to 'What is reality?' is 'Whatever can fit within our frame' – a simple digital yes (real) or no (unreal).

When I insist, contrarily, that 'real' is an absolute, like 'beautiful' or 'just,' I must also affirm that things, concepts, and even persons can be more or less real. **They are varying degrees with GOD. And GOD is Seeing what they do. (Q3:162-163)** Reality is hierarchical in nature, cascading down from GOD to His angels, His messengers, His beloved servants, His ordinary creatures, His opponents and detractors, and finally even His demons and other denizens of Hell. A similar gradation from high to low reality can be asserted in terms of knowledge, from the Qur'ān to the trashiest tabloid, in terms of places, from the Holy Sanctuary to the sites of massacres or temples of usury (the banks), and in terms of activities, from performing a prostration during worship to doing a drug deal. The fact that they are all persons, or are all printed materials, or are all places, or all actions, is merely a fact, and it is in the nature of 'facts' to cram all realities into a single-level dwelling, a numerical mass grave.

وَمَا يَسْتَوِي الْأَعْمَىٰ وَالْبَصِيرُ  
وَلَا الظُّلُمَاتُ وَلَا النُّورُ  
وَلَا الظِّلُّ وَلَا الْحَرُورُ  
وَمَا يَسْتَوِي الْأَحْيَاءُ وَلَا الْأَمْوَاتُ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُسْمِعُ مَن يَشَاءُ وَمَا أَنتَ  
بِمُسْمِعٍ مَّن فِي الْقُبُورِ

**The blind and sighted are not equal, / Nor are darknesses with light, / And neither is the shade with grievous heat. / Not equal are the living and the dead. Indeed AL-LĀH lets those He wishes hear. And you cannot give hearing to the people in their graves. (Q35:19–22)**

Challenge #10: Reality is valuable.

Reality is one of GOD's Own Names, and hence extremely Personal. But if reality were a thing – which happens when we conceive of it as an 'It' rather than a 'Him' – then reality would be the most valuable thing in the world. Every living thing necessarily dies for it (and a few devoted truth-seekers would willingly die for it). It is impossible to overstate the value of Reality as our ultimate goal, and yet most of us fail to see how that, in

turn, makes it hard to overstate the scale of reality in values, particularly in contrast to supposedly value-free facts. By way of clarification and summary, I provide here two examples.

1) There is an emblem of a flower on our box of tea bags in the kitchen. The emblem was produced by an industrial artist, or copied from a graphics library somewhere, and then mass-printed onto hundreds of thousands of similar containers. The artist, the graphic designer, the printer, and the other professionals and wage-earners who worked to put that emblem there make a living from such work, which helps sell the tea bags and make money for the manufacturer, wholesalers, and retailers of that item.

Also at home, on the wall in the kitchen, is a painting of a flower. My wife spent hours painting it, and I spent money to have it framed. Although not professional, the picture on the wall is far more valuable to me than the graphic on the tea carton. Why?

Despite it being the work of an amateur, the painting is not only detailed but also beautiful. It took hours to create, displaying care, imagination, keen attention, a desire to improve her technique, and a love of artistry free of any thought of remuneration. Monetarily, it and its frame represent a loss to me, but our gain in the intangible values I just mentioned is incomparably greater. Its existence is a fact, but a fact with wings that take us up to a heaven where GOD's Care, Creativity, Attentiveness, Compassion for humanity, and Love of beauty are more deeply felt and more clearly manifest. I see in it a little of GOD's Personality, something of my wife's, and something of the relationship between them. The values in it are hard to define – elusive – but their manifestations are abundant – effusive. I find those values meaningful and affecting. The work began as a concept, blossomed into a painting, and represents multiple levels of the same reality I am seeking by other means, as I type these words.

A critic might object, however, that these are only feelings, and entirely subjective. Of course they are. What the critic wants is a reality that reflects his concern for quantities – the number of jobs ensured, the amount of money made, the contribution to the GNP, and so on. But that concern, too, is only a feeling, no matter how many people count it more important. The calculating subjectivity of the critic is also real, but at a lower level; it is less real for me, and that critic might agree if I were to invite him to my home to admire my wife's painting. The image on the carton faintly reminds us of some of GOD's qualities, such as being the Provider of human sustenance, but in a back-handed, dispiriting way. People are paid to

put little graphics on tea cartons, but without the esthetic delight and love that goes into painting flowers at home without pay. Two subjective realities are produced – one that is basically pure, tending upward, and possibly never to be remembered by anyone but GOD, and another that is a fleeting, sensory impression, lost in the hum of machinery and the banality of grocery shopping. Value is always subjective, even if everyone agrees on it. Yet it is our subjectivity, our personal relation to Reality, that will be judged by One Whose Subjectivity has unfolded into the Ultimate Objectivity of being GOD.

2) Agatha is a housewife with two young children. Although she has a university degree, and could have succeeded in a career, she decided to sacrifice her prospects outside for domestic security and the responsibilities of motherhood. She thought, at the time, that it was the right thing to do. Now, however, after three years at home, she is bored, frustrated, and regretful. She has discovered, to her chagrin, that looking after infants is a chore for which her education and student activities gave her no emotional or spiritual preparation. She has no religion, no underlying faith to fall back on as consolation, and very little social support. She carries on with the drudgery of home-making, but her heart is no longer in it. She wants out, and is impatiently scanning the chances of affordable pre-school placement for her young children.

Rosalie, on the other hand, is a successful lawyer with a hefty income, a carefully curated independence, and an active after-hours social life. But the empty glitter and vapid pleasure have begun to pall, and she has come to realize how exhausting and relentless the career ladder can be. Is she running out of time to have a family? Perhaps it wouldn't matter if she simply forgot about children. Her friends coax her into more vacations, more binge drinking, and more shopping. Yet the constant round of work and pleasure is starting to feel tawdry and meaningless. What are the real values worth pursuing in life?

Neither Agatha nor Rosalie made their choices based upon clear pre-existing absolutes, but assumed that whatever values coincided with or followed on from their choices would be comfortable and right. They did not ask what values would be inherent in or implied by their chosen situation, (i.e., a moral outlook suitable for life at home, or the questionable ethics that complement a competitive, glamorous work environment). And until they can identify what values they have, on the one hand, and what values they want, on the other, they will continue to be haunted by thoughts of 'could be', 'what if', and 'who cares?'

More importantly, neither of them ever asked themselves, ‘Given who I am, what does GOD want from me?’ What are His values for me?’ That would be a paradigm shift of enormous importance, as only GOD has the power to make ‘ought’ become ‘is,’ to convert our distant ideals into the realities of the living present.



Values provide the motivations and feelings we need to accept any set of circumstances, no matter how adverse, but that acceptance requires both conscious effort and a careful choice of environment and companions. (Not everyone has the luxury of external choices, but we can all work on our internal, personal culture and the attendant spirits of our private lives.) What makes these values real is that we can strive at selecting them as consciously as we choose anything else in this world, and then watch them work their magic on our attitudes, our relationships, and our sense of meaning and achievement. But if we dismiss them as mere wispy concomitants of facts, as fleeting as our preferences in food and entertainment, they will continue to hover around us like dark clouds, obscuring our sense of self and obliterating our awareness of GOD.

Our time in this world is spent against the background of His suspended Judgement, and the values we follow, whether keenly or carelessly, are His messenger-spirits, whispering to us of a certain fate that we can see in their faces, if we dare to look.

## THE CYCLE OF REALITY



إِنَّمَا مَثَلُ الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا كَمَاءٍ أَنْزَلْنَاهُ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ فَاخْتَلَطَ بِهِ نَبَاتُ  
الْأَرْضِ مِمَّا يَأْكُلُ النَّاسُ وَالْأَنْعَامُ حَتَّى إِذَا أَخَذَتِ الْأَرْضُ زُخْرُفَهَا  
وَارْتَيْبَتْ وَظَنَّ أَهْلُهَا أَنَّهُمْ قَادِرُونَ عَلَيْهَا أَتَاهَا أَمْرُنَا لَيْلًا أَوْ نَهَارًا  
فَجَعَلْنَاهَا حَصِيدًا كَأَن لَّمْ تَغْنَ بِالْأَمْسِ كَذَلِكَ نُفَصِّلُ الْآيَاتِ لِقَوْمٍ  
يَتَفَكَّرُونَ

وَاللَّهُ يَدْعُو إِلَى دَارِ السَّلَامِ وَيَهْدِي مَنْ يَشَاءُ إِلَى صِرَاطٍ مُسْتَقِيمٍ

The likeness of this worldly life is only as the water that We sent down from the sky. So then the vegetation of the earth commingled with it, and from it the people and the livestock ate. Then when the earth put on its ornaments and gained in loveliness, and those of it believed they were the masters of it, Our Command arrived by night or day, and then We mowed it down as if it had not flourished on the day before. That is the way We explicate Our signs for thinking folk. / And GOD is issuing a summons to the Home of Peace. He guides the one who wills [or He wills] upon the upright path. (Q10:24–25)

In Chapter 41, I referred to the many versions of reality in the universe. Each version, no matter how real or unreal, can be called a world. When GOD, therefore, begins by presenting **the likeness of this worldly life**, He is offering a conceptual handle on what all our worlds and lives have in common – a shared reality, as it were. He could have described their commonalities in more abstract terms, which is what I propose to do here now, but since most of mankind thinks pictorially, He is offering a set of images as **Our signs for thinking folk**. He is saying, in effect, ‘This is what unites the vastly disparate experiences of all living beings. No matter who or what you are, you will encounter these aspects of reality. To grasp what is true or real about your life, you need to see this.’



In the previous chapter, I listed 10 basic features of Reality according to the Qur'ān. (There could be more, of course.) In the order I presented them, Reality is

- 1) personal;
- 2) reciprocal;
- 3) elusive;
- 4) effusive;
- 5) meaningful;
- 6) affective and effective, in terms of Who GOD is; and
- 7) multidimensional;
- 8) primarily conceptual;
- 9) vertically gradated; and
- 10) valuable, in terms of what GOD is or does.

All of these features are noticeable in this two-verse passage; I will mention them in the order of their appearance.

8) AL-LĀH begins by depicting our lives through a parable, or **likeness**. On the one hand, the experiences of sentient beings are far too multifarious for one human mind to take in their uniqueness and concreteness. On the other hand, Reality is too abstract to be grasped in any way except symbolically. AL-LĀH, therefore, offers an intermediary verbal image, a conceptual bridge, that can serve to join the sensual diversity of the everyday to the spiritual heights of the Everafter. What we in English would call a metaphor, a vital arm in our armory of concepts, GOD refers to as a **likeness**, one example of **Our signs**. We could say that this conceptual aspect of reality is primary and essential in **the way** He conveys that to us.

The separate, individual reality of our personal experience is itself a sign, one that can be conceptualized to point to a greater reality, which is also a sign, which can be likewise conceptualized, on and on all the way up to GOD's **loftiest metaphor** – as we will see when we come to feature 9. As infants, we experience things first, and only later, as we grow older, the concepts for them. In terms of their creation, however, AL-LĀH begins with the concept, i.e., His name for it, followed by His Word – “**Be!**” – and only then does that thing come to be. Likewise, with this wording in verse 24, mention of the **likeness** precedes the thing itself, **this worldly life**.

7) What symbolizes **this worldly life**? **Water**. Water is perfect for representing the multifaceted and mutable nature of reality experienced in the form of things. I mentioned in Chapter 39 how the queen tried to avoid getting immersed in the world of things, symbolized by the pool beneath the invisible glass of the higher intellect. Here, however, we are looking at the reality of those things.

Like water, things have a vaporous origin in the verbal or conceptual realm where creation begins. They then, like water, become liquid – mobile, changeable, and productive. Water is absorbed into vegetation, acquiring a solid habitat and promoting its growth. Things, likewise, are consumed by our senses, as data to be interpreted, and by our watery bodies as material to be digested. Objective reality, in other words, is continuously being transformed by a yet unnamed Subject, and those transformations are preconditions for **worldly life**. **Vegetation** is another dimension of that truth; it represents the reality of water in terms of the growth it supports. But death and destruction, as when the **vegetation** and all that depends on it are **mowed down**, constitute essential elements in this greater picture of **worldly life** as well. The coherence and interchange of opposites in a larger scheme of existence are also evident in the temporal dimension – **by night or day**. Multiple and even conflicting worlds of experience do not negate the broad strokes of reality that dominate this scene of being in flux.

1) In Q21:30, AL-LĀH says,

وَجَعَلْنَا مِنَ الْمَاءِ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ حَيٍّ

**We made from water every living thing.**

Commentators are likely to focus on the ideas of water and life, and how the latter depends upon the former. But of greater importance – and relevance to the present discussion of Q10:24 – is the **We** that precedes it all. Without GOD, Who is The Living (Al-Ḥayy), and not a thing, there is neither water nor life, nor anything at all. The use of **We** in **We sent down** emphasizes that GOD is much more, to us and in His Own Being, than some kind of impersonal cosmic force. He is both Absolute Reality and Absolute Personality. And insofar as we are persons, we are more real to Him than anything else, and more real to ourselves as well.

One could say, therefore, that ‘personal’ correlates with ‘real.’ The more personable someone is, the more real we find him to be. We all know and feel that to be true, intuitively, at some deep level of our being, but scientism has succeeded in convincing many of us otherwise, to our great

shame and loss. The more modern humanity becomes enthralled by its heartless, bureaucratic systems of production, management, communication, and education, the less real and the more robotic its participants and promoters become. Their hearts harden, their faces turn dark with pride and greed, and Satan convinces them that they are masters of the world rather than his slaves. Then the wealth and power such satanic systems bring cause these pseudo-humans and sociopaths to all act and talk and think the same way, for the same predictable ends.

That is when **Our Command** arrives – when Personality resumes its reign at last. Amid the darkness and unreality, however, His Guidance was always available to **the one who** was willing, or **the one** He willed (**Q10:25**). Both meanings are possible in the Arabic, and the ambiguity of whose will is meant is, I believe, intentional. It shows that when He wills to guide someone, it coincides with and confirms that person's own willingness. Such a convergence in a higher Reality is only possible between persons.

9) Like rain **sent down from the sky**, our absolutes start out above us. The sky is symbolic of a higher, clearer, and purer Reality, its physical location signifying its superior quality. Water in **the sky** does not even have to look like the water on **the earth** for us to believe in the vertical connection between them, and that one comes from the other. Without having to precisely pinpoint their first address, we on earth can see and feel that our values come from a higher place that inspires, illuminates, sustains, and guides us.

To devalue something is to lower it in our opinion, not to raise it to some intermediate level – which means that we instinctively associate value with height. Our language is soaked in a reality whereby even brute facts require the light touch of an onlooker's appreciation to appear. Reality, in short, is felt and known to have an undeniably vertical dimension – one that we feel from infancy as we look up into the wise and caring faces of our parents and teachers.

3) One fascinating aspect of water is that we never see as much of it as there is actually present. Experts tell us that a tree is made up of approximately 50 percent water, depending on its age and species, and that the human body varies from about 78 percent water at birth to around 50 percent as we grow older. If this worldly life is like water, therefore, then its Reality is not just elusive but also hard to imagine and even harder to see.

If faith in AL-LĀH were a house, then faith in the unseen – in the

elusive aspect of Reality – would be its front porch. Believing that Reality is elusive does not mean that we simply accept rumours and speculative nonsense as true. Rather it is an awareness that there is a reverse face to reality, like the dark side of the moon, that we cannot always identify or describe, but for which we have sufficient evidence to accept its existence.

The first mention of faith in the Qur’ān (Q2:3) does not continue with “in GOD,” but rather with **the unseen (al-ghaib)**. If you cannot believe in that, then your belief in God will necessarily be materialistic, idolatrous, and false. We know that there is water in the tree, even if we cannot see it when we cut it down and saw it into pieces. In the same way, the believer is convinced that there is a moral order that is **commingled with** our physical existence and is the source of its life and meaning. We ‘know’ that it is so by its effects, just as we know that the tree contains water by observing its foliage, its recurrent growth, and its deep roots and abundant fruits.

Some Sufis say that the destruction of this world is averted, likewise, by the presence in it of various ranks of saints, or *awliyā*, in numbers that vary in different narrations. “They are not known and recognized by the general public. In fact, amongst them one does not know the other and they themselves are not aware of the validity of their actions and devotion. All these are hidden from them and the general public.”<sup>33</sup> Like the rainfall, they disappear into the environment, moistening the ground for all living creatures and ensuring that GOD’s Mercy is not suddenly withdrawn **as if it had not flourished on the day before**. At the individual level, moreover, guardian angels ward off spiritual harm we consequently never detect, and there are likewise elements within our souls that work for our benefit or detriment without our ever being aware of them.

ثُمَّ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكُمْ مَرْجِعُكُمْ فَيُنَبِّئُكُم بِمَا كُنتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ إِنَّهُ عَلِيمٌ بِذَاتِ  
الصُّدُورِ

**Then to your Lord is your return, and He will tell you what you used to do. Indeed He is Cognizant of what lies in [human] hearts. (Q39:7)**

6) Reality fills our stomachs, minds, and hearts as we – **the people and the livestock** – consume it. But we consume it indirectly, as material, intellectual, and spiritual vegetation, and so almost always concern ourselves with it in terms of our benefit or loss and forget the Benefactor.

We are all recipients of His gifts, and they are effective in all of us.

<sup>33</sup> <https://islamqa.org/hanafi/askimam/29291/what-proof-is-there-for-awliya-akhyaarabdaal-abraar-awtaad-noqabah-and-ghous-from-quranhadith/>.

But the affective impact – how we feel as a result of His acts of Generosity – differs markedly from one person to the next. The vast majority of people, when they receive something from Him, are overjoyed by the gift and, as persons over things, **believe they are the masters of it**. Despite GOD being the Ultimate Cause and Donor, they immediately look for a material cause to explain how the gift came to them, and proceed to work for continuance and control of that cause.

A second type – also a sizable group – believe in God, but are overjoyed that it was to them that the gift came. They thus view God instrumentally, as a powerful force working on their behalf, for their ends, and confirming what they always thought themselves to be – a chosen people.

A third group comprises but a few rare souls. They are overjoyed by Who gave them that gift. For these devoted subjects, no gift of His is too small or hard to see, and no recipient is more fortunate than another, even if they receive the least of all. To them, GOD makes a gift of Himself, filling their lives with His Joy, no matter what they get or who they become. For them, Reality is a felt presence of lasting value, not a plastic thing, a cheap toy for children, or a flattering word that makes them swell with adolescent pride and self-importance.

4) In the animal kingdom, males demonstrate their potency and surplus strength by effusive displays – of growth (the elk), of colour (the bird of paradise), of sound (the nightingale), of size (the sea lion), and even proficiency in construction (the bower bird) – and some female species (the firefly) use bioluminescence to advertise their fertility. Effusiveness comes in other forms too, such as the prodigious amounts of eggs spawned by certain species of fish, or the tremendous quantities of maple keys and dandelion seeds cast upon the ground or on the wind, and almost all to no effect. This has been going on all the time, year after year, for eons. And when we cast our gaze, no longer limited by biology, upon the universe, we are astounded by the bewildering display of extravagant Reality that has been waiting all these billions of years for our unbounded amazement.

Human individuals and nations also enjoy extraordinary endowments of various kinds, as evinced by enormous disparities in wealth, power, beauty, artistic talent, intellectual ability, and spiritual strength. Of all of this we can say:

ذَلِكَ فَضْلُ اللَّهِ يُؤْتِيهِ مَنْ يَشَاءُ وَاللَّهُ ذُو الْفَضْلِ الْعَظِيمِ

**That is the favour of AL-LĀH He gives to whom He wills. And GOD possesses overwhelming favour. (Q62:4)**

With these thoughts as background perspective, we read how **the earth put on its ornaments and gained in loveliness** and realize that all this is meaningfully directed at us – a supernatural display of GOD’s infinite surplus of Power and Knowledge that He is ready to share with mankind as soon as we are ready to receive it.

5) Grandeur even than the unspeakable grandeur of the material universe is its intrinsic meaning. Not only does every particle in it mean something, each particle has the potential to mean something different to every other particle in the universe. And then every one of those explications is virtually unlimited in what it could mean at any number of higher levels of meaning and reality. In other words, the intelligible and communicative aspects of Reality so far outweigh its already mind-boggling material dimension that we have neither words nor numbers to even begin to conceive of what it all means. If **thinking folk** start pondering over this, they can only end up repeating over and over again, like mystics finally dazzled by His Infinite Light: AL-LĀH! AL-LĀH! AL-LĀH!

We speak of information overload as an inescapable curse of today’s data-driven madness. The only cure I know for that is what I am doing now – attempting to construct a frame of meaning, like a trellis for morning glories, under which data are put down as soil for faith to flourish. But what is the cure for what I am discussing here – an overload of meaning? What do you do when absolutely everything is a sign that **explicates** everything else around it, and points all the way up to Ultimate Meaning, to GOD? Any computer built by man could only collapse and implode in the face of this colossal Reality, but the believing soul converts this cosmic *koan* into the simple, transcendent act of throwing oneself down like soil on the ground:

إِذَا تَنَلَّى عَلَيْهِمْ آيَاتُ الرَّحْمَنِ خَرُّوا سُجَّدًا وَبُكِيًّا

**When the signs of the Most Gracious were recited unto them, they fell down in prostration and in tears. (19:58)**

When faced with the reality of growth, life, death, and resurrection, an intelligent response is not to revert to meaningless, impersonal regurgitation of data, like a server, but to gratefully accept what Reality means for me, as a servant. As a person, I was created not only to process meaning, but to interact with it.

2) We imagine reality to be some sort of static, neutral object, or at best a Supreme Person on a remote celestial throne. I cannot relate to you

like that, because such an attitude would dehumanize and distance you from any meaningful relationship. It would no longer be you, but a projection of my own stunted perceptions and prejudices.

Reality, likewise, is neither indifferent nor aloof ... unless we insist on regarding Him as an uncommunicative, uncaring, and unreachable It. To dispel that unworthy thought, He declares that **GOD is issuing a summons**, and that **He guides** whoever truly intends to escape from that debilitating mindset. Guidance implies a willingness on our part to look, while a summons suggests a readiness to listen. Our relationship to GOD is not just passive and programmed, but a dynamic interplay involving all the same deeper faculties we use when dealing with our families, friends, and fellow travellers in life.

Of course, it takes attentiveness, imagination, and faith to embark on this path of prayer, and patient resolve to persist with it when the normal cues of interaction do not automatically appear as they do with the people around us. But that is probably because we are looking outside for visible signs, while our heart is busy whispering to no one but itself. When that aimless self-talk is stilled, however, He is felt to be right there beside us, then heard, and finally ‘seen’ in a way open to no one but angels.

When you, incomparable you, and the stories you’ve told yourself year after year,  
 The illusions you’ve woven to ward off the weight and the glare and the fear,  
 Those dark-spreading drugs and obsessions, the way they cohere  
     In covering all that you claimed to be dear –  
 Your thoughts on a stampeding spiral to hell,  
     With nothing to say, and no one to tell –  
 When your powers and plans disappear,  
     Yourself no more than a tear,  
     Only then am I near  
     ... no – Here.

**10)** AL-LĀH is calling us back to **the Home of Peace**, the spiritual ocean where all the absolutes I began to discuss in Chapter 1 shed the contradictions of **this worldly life** and become reconciled in His Transcendent Unity. This Unicity, however, is so incomprehensible to us here on earth that He spreads it out in our mental space like an orchard filled with fruits, and extends our harvest of it over time in the form of His **upright path**. The abstract entities we prize most highly – knowledge, beauty, love, justice, et cetera – blend and shade into one another like the colours of the

visible spectrum. Facts appear in this continuum as fragments of the truth, miniature unities that can, however, be measured and broken down. Spirits in this world start out as ‘factual’ by conforming to this embodied discreteness of things, and either remain trapped in that state until death or remember that they were **sent down from the sky** and find **the upright path** that restores them to continuity, integrity, and wholeness.

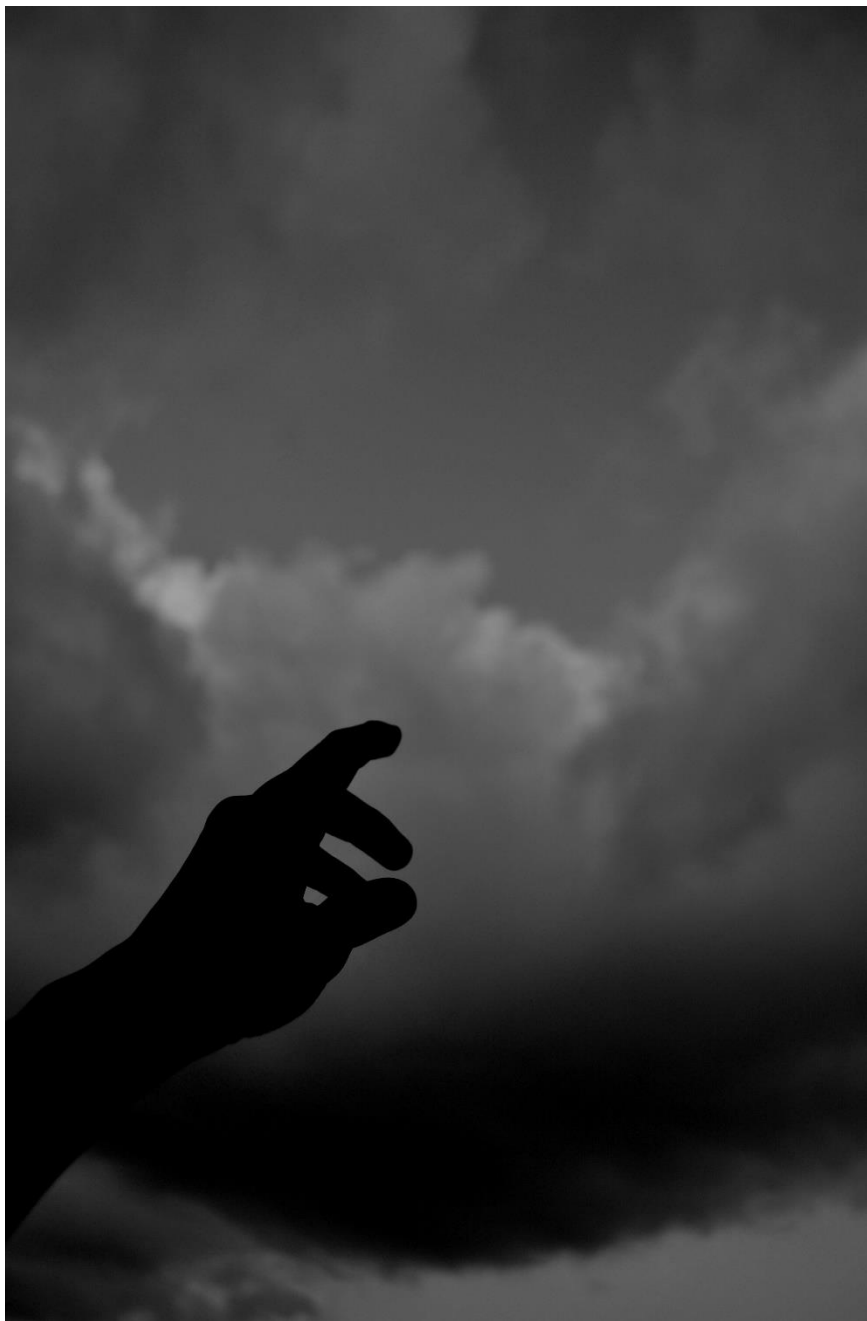
Facts and values do not negate each other. Rather they are complementary terms for two ends on the same scale of basic experience. As I said before, facts are values with roots, and values are facts with wings. “Moral values are not something that we work out rationally, but are irreducible aspects of the phenomenal world, like colour ... a form of experience irreducible to any other kind, or accountable for on any other terms.”<sup>34</sup> While facts are normally judged as true or false, and thus can be manipulated to serve our present-day obsessions with masses of data, money, and digital versions of reality, values are in some sense post-factual. They represent a kind of preview of how the facts that we produced by our attitudes and behaviour will be judged. Your values, in other words, are what your future looks like, your imminent Reality, while facts, **as if they had not flourished on the day before**, become no more than a record of reference when **He will tell you what you used to do. (Q9:105)**

The values hidden in your heart are Divine **signs for thinking folk**. They are omens of the fate that awaits you in the Everafter – signs of trouble if your values follow the brutal facts of greed, rage, pride, and passion, or signs of a higher, happier Reality that awaits you in GOD’s **Home of Peace**.

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<sup>34</sup> McGilchrist, p. 86.





*Photography:*  
Fidan Nazim Qizi

## 47.

### FIFTH SYNOPSIS



109. AL-LĀH is Absolute Reality. In relative terms, reality is what lies between GOD and nothing.
110. This range is the realm of things, namely created things and their origins in words and symbols.
111. The language of the Qur'ān is more or less symbolic depending on the subject matter.
112. Symbolic language works by simultaneously evoking images and multiple levels of meaning.
113. This is particularly evident in GOD's "most lofty metaphor" – the heavens and the earth.
114. They symbolize, among other meanings, a vertical order of reality that transcends creation.
115. Ādam's appointment as GOD's representative on earth came with a transcendent knowledge.
116. This knowledge, which the angels lacked, consists in the creative power of naming things.
117. Naming brings things, both real and illusory, into being ... hence its power and its danger.
118. While names provide access to higher realities, they also can lead to lies, delusions, and enmity.
119. Modern orthodoxy tends to equate reality with science, facts, and incoherent egocentric values.
120. Qur'ānic reality integrates, by contrast, the main human concerns – our inner being and final fate.
121. Reality is personal and reciprocal. Since personality implies interaction, He reciprocates with us.
122. Reality is elusive, as not all can be known by us, and effusive, as His expressiveness is boundless.
123. Reality is expressed in meaning what He says, saying what He does, and doing what He wills.

124. Reality takes effect in several ways – first conceptually, as we are spoken into being, then factually.

125. Reality speaks to all humanity, but at various levels; it is our highest values that best echo Reality.

48.

## SKY-SCRAPINGS



1. If you cannot imagine yourself at this moment face to face with GOD, you have your face on backwards. Or you have not yet grown a face.
2. You may not be recognizing what you are actually seeing. Each 'I' in you has its own eye.
3. Gaze out at the world, and see how vast your soul could be in the sight of GOD. Gaze in at your soul, and see how dark and empty the world will become when GOD fills your sight.
4. Harsh reality is healthier than a comfortable lie. Why else are simple people, with their struggles and sorrows, more cheerful than the wealthy with their symphonies, sycophants, and sins?
5. The truth is too important for GOD to deny the understanding of it to the simplest child. Hence those who pride themselves on intellect are the worst liars, the most corrupt, and the most deluded.
6. A long-term orbit convinces its passengers that they are on a straight line. Only on arriving at their starting point do they see their error. The upright path to GOD is perpendicular to biological life.
7. The human race is named so for a reason; in Paradise, its streams are many, and running for us. A sense of quality is fittingly named taste; for this, the subtlest of our senses, Paradise produces fruits.
8. To judge fairly among persons, we need GOD. To judge fairly within a person, we need Him even more. Who but He could separate a soul's best faculties from its worst, and give to each its due?
9. All human kingdoms, mental or material, are make-believe. The only kingdoms allowed to stand on the Last Day are those that were made to believe in the King, the Maker, the First Believer.

10. The life and death of the earth are seen in growth and disintegration. Their counterparts in heaven are faith and despair. GOD helps us to grow, but only by His Friendship can we believe in Him.
11. Our bargain with our Creator was that for life we must accept death, for pleasure, pain, and for good, evil. Nothing living refused that primal deal; complaints after the fact are in bad faith.
12. It all depends on where you stand. From the valley floor of noisy bustle, prayer appears a waste of time. But on the peaks, beneath Eternity, what could be more urgent than a dialogue with GOD?
13. If death is literally nothing, the rational atheist has nothing to fear from it. He can only fear his denial of GOD is also worth nothing, and that around him and his two nothings there is Someone.
14. The immediate reward for doing good is being good. But since being good belongs to GOD, it is intangible, and so goes unnoticed. Feeling good is a foretaste, but is available here even to the bad.
15. As a concept, infinity is clear. As an experience, finitude is easy to grasp. Yet between them we are constantly confused: our hearts long to taste infinity, but small minds want to capture it.
16. We are doubly disappointed – by our demand for certainty in the things of this world, where it cannot be had, and by our lack of certainty in the Everafter, where for most of us it comes too late.
17. Think of the poor, the sick, the disgraced ... and you are one of them. Whichever way you turn in this world, you find no solace. It is then you know why you need GOD, and where to find Him.
18. No human plan, idea, rule of life, or ruler can unite mankind. The autonomy GOD has placed in every human heart is too absolute for that. Rather it is the Resurrector Himself Who will unite us.
19. GOD enjoins patience on us for what befalls us. However bad our past may be, it is also, thankfully, over. So patience with (and penitence for) that fallen past may be the best thing befalling us now.
20. Seeking the truth while denying revelation is like drilling wells and building pipes without ever seeing a cloud or feeling a breeze. Earthly wisdom may wet the soul, but the spirit thirsts for Spirit.

21. The higher the life form, the greater its readiness for non-biological modes of growth. Every spirit has a Paradise – a breakthrough in bliss and beauty – that represents its capacity for transcendence.
22. The anthropic principle tries to explain the precise fit between us, the observers, and our cosmos in terms of blind statistics. GOD does explain it as intentional craft. Whose telling merits our trust?
23. Spiritual growth is a fiery process, requiring both heat and light. Some wayfarers want the heat, and fail to see their errors. Others squint for light, but are unmoved by the truth when they see it.
24. Fear and hope are poured into our lives, and wisely so. It is by tasting many fears and hopes that we can learn to rank them. Only then can we learn what is worse than death, and better than life.
25. Wisdom, in the beginning, might only come from long toil in the mines of learning. But there are times, later in life, when dusty gems of knowledge start to sparkle in the long rays of wisdom.
26. Moral beings, like biological beings, have both hard and soft elements. Creatures need skeletons, interior walls, and surfaces to survive; so also do religions live by contrasts, rules, and barriers.
27. When the night of disappointment falls, listen to the truths that were enshrined in it for you. When the day brings high hopes, mark how the world will look when you are gone from it.
28. Things are by nature dependent. Each thing depends either on another thing, or on One Who is not a thing. If the former is always true, reality is forever disunited. If the latter, then reality is One.
29. Faith in GOD as the Immediate Giver of all things is no more a denial of the scientific version of causality than blaming ‘you’ for slapping my face denies the fact that it was only your hand I felt.
30. Reciting scriptures is not guidance, nor is studying nature. GOD’s Guidance comes to those whose hearts and minds are open to both revelation and creation, using each one to illuminate the other.
31. Though GOD cannot be seen in this world, hearts that want Him find Him. So who can blame Him for hiding, when He lets us see every thing we want and then we only want the things we see?

32. Our demand to see GOD is like a baby crying for his mother to care for him according to his terms – fretting, burping, and so on. By ignoring such calls, GOD is telling us to stop acting like babies.
33. We have needed great feats of intellect to extract our current meagre level of scientific knowledge from physical reality. How much more, then, was required to arrange it all there in the first place?
34. ‘Amid the gruesome brutality and gratuitous suffering of war, where is GOD?’ – Exactly where you left Him when you descended into the street, running for survival or panting for victory.
35. For those who aim to keep their mental frames, a sign of GOD is a traffic warning or a highway marker. But for those who are intent on breaking them, His signs are ladders or launching pads.
36. Nearing a culture’s zenith, the shadows in it are small and easy to detect. But as we decline towards nightfall, the outlines of darkness grow soft and long, till nearly all are thralls in nihil’s realm.
37. Truth without obedience produces pride and sophistry. Obedience without truth leads to blindness and oppression. Only truth can justify obedience, and only obedience can activate the truth.
38. GOD’s Forgiveness outweighs in its meaning a lifetime of global atrocities that the offender then admits and repents of to Him. Those who scoff at this overvalue the world and undervalue Him.
39. We err grievously in judging ideas by the people who espouse them. The noblest truths, which are GOD’s to grant, can easily come to rest on the unqualified, or be unjustly claimed by the corrupt.
40. Does the rain just fall, or is it sent? If the world is dead, a product of lifeless forces, then rain falls unfeelingly. But if the world is alive, then rain is sent by the Living, and shares in His Liveliness.
41. Do events simply occur, or are they intended? If things were never meant to be, then why do we thrust meaning on them? But if everything has its Intender, then how can anything be meaningless?
42. Requiring rigorous unity of this world, be it intellectual, cultural, political, or religious, is a kind of idolatry, as it demands the Unicity of GOD come down into a realm of ambivalence and duality.

43. The signs of GOD are necessarily many; no one symbol, text, or person may establish an absolute monopoly on the way to Him. When such a claim is made and accepted, idolatry inevitably follows.
44. What can one say of a faith that is vocal in matters where GOD is silent, and dumb where GOD is eloquent? Sound belief proportions its emphases by the relative weight each topic has in its texts.
45. One cannot assess the worth of seeds by their failing to sprout in cities filled with concrete and manicured lawns. Nor can one judge a faith by adherents who have warped it to fit their vices.
46. If you are proud of your success, remember GOD could destroy it in a heartbeat. Your success is on His Terms and by His Will. And His Will does not imply that He is pleased with your success.
47. Satan is a malevolent life form in humans; he accepts GOD's existence but not His commands. What can be said, then, of souls in humans who neither accept His commands nor His existence?
48. While GOD makes spiritual opportunities unequal, His Justice counts both handicaps and efforts in awarding outcomes. But worldly inequalities remain just so – without GOD, they remain unjust.
49. Earth is our physical home; we can safely explore the heavens from its reliable solidity. GOD is our spiritual Home; we can safely explore the diversity of values when we start with His Unicity.
50. Expand your horizons. Do not crouch in the cozy shadiness of presentism, as a toad under a coconut shell, but view today's regimes like ancient kingdoms, and past empires as if you live in them now.



## 49.

### EARTHWORDS



1. You have been hired by a Master Gardener to weed out the vices in your soul. Do that, and only then do you deserve to see and admire the virtues He was planting in the meantime.
2. Your soul now is in its prenatal stage. A swollen head will make passage through the birth canal of death a torment. A stunted heart might require a long spell in that incubator called Hell.
3. The exercise that best prepares you for a happy birth in the Everafter is prostration. It strengthens humility as the ground of your being, and in it your heart is closer to heaven than your head.
4. This world is full of first impressions, the hors d'oeuvres of reality, so restrain yourself. Leave room for the main course of the Everafter, where sober second thought is savoured and celebrated.
5. The earth tells you where you are, but the sky tells you who you are. Combine, then, the ideals of an angel with the skills of a geographer to set out well-laid plans with the most beautiful results.
6. Those who think they can affect this gigantic financial-military-media machine by voting and protests are like visitors at an aquarium who pound on the glass when the killer whale swims past.
7. Various absolutes enter into each situation, so make sure in handling it you have access to all those absolutes in your portfolio of thoughts and feelings. No one provides all of them but their Owner.
8. Any relationship with GOD should have these five attributes of Paradise: felicity, diversity, integrity, intimacy, and eternity. Each can be entered into, tasted, and observed at leisure.

9. One can make a living out of telling lies, or telling tales to entertain, or even telling and selling the truth. Only GOD lives by being True; He loves those who know truth must be told but never sold.
10. Your creation was a miracle, so be grateful. Your spirit, mind, and body comprise hierarchies of value, so respect their order. You were made symmetrical, so be impartial in your judgements.
11. Dreams can promise happiness, but only GOD can provide it. If you have never learned to be happy with what you've got, you will likely never learn to be happy with what you get.
12. In this world, ethics and ontology go their separate ways ... until the Everafter. It is there that our lowly wants govern what we get (Hell), or what we get is as high as the One we wanted (Heaven).
13. If you find it hard to love GOD more, start by loving things less. As your love of GOD grows brighter, the things you cherished come back to you, as conversation pieces between you and Him.
14. The job of a scholar is to add to the joy of not being a scholar. Like a candle, he lowers himself so that ordinary folk can dance in his light and bathe more freely in the glow of knowledge he affords.
15. A scholar who squirms for other scholars' approval is like a worm that feeds upon the droppings of other worms. Where is the knowledge or giving to a higher good in such a low and selfish life?
16. In worship, forget yourself – a dark, bottomless mess. Nor can GOD be your object; He is the Real Subject. Rather dwell in the endless joy of coming home – the feeling that binds you to Him.
17. Every setback reminds the believer that this world was not for him ... and that the Everafter is. No wonder, then, that he meets defeat with fortitude, and responds to failure with a secret smile.
18. True faith always opposes the falsehoods of society. When those lies prevail, believers must prove their love by struggle, alienation, and disgrace – the price of being loved, in turn, by the Truth.
19. Reacting emotionally to events is natural, for GOD designed the world to produce such events and creatures to have such reactions. Decide, then, what creature you want to be before you react.

20. Everyone has his god and his desires. A strong god opposes base desires and gently replaces them with enjoyment of the truth. A false god is weak, and shelters in those base desires for its survival.
21. Know you have been cursed by GOD when you think that your survival depends on lying, then condoning evil, then committing evil, and finally being evil. At that last step, you become a devil.
22. Seeds, eggs, and wombs face pain, rupture, and damage in giving birth. If your habits, ideas, and self-respect cannot be hurt, your spirit will remain an embryo, unfit for life and unready for death.
23. Many sinners remain so, and miserably so, by refusing a forgiveness written and ready for them. They would rather struggle vainly to justify a little error than to resign it forever to GOD's Mercy.
24. If you would only give up obsessions over your past and pride in your present identity, GOD will make His reality, which is Forgiveness, a constant present to you in place of your worrisome future.
25. GOD is so caring, close, and communicative that any intercessor or saviour you could think of would not help gain His Forgiveness but only hinder your acceptance of it ... at your insistence.
26. In the ruins of these times, do not forget the Timeless and His hidden springs of solace. Will you not take a sip from One Who rises over ruins so that you might spring for joy from them to Him?
27. Pleasure and information can be produced, but real happiness and true knowledge are gifts with preconditions. Though we toil for those conditions, we often fail to seek a connection to the Giver.
28. Did you think that your True Love would let you live forever separated from Him? If your devotion is real, you will weep – or leap – for joy when He calls. It could be any moment now; get ready.
29. When an evil plan is proposed in your presence, voice your opposition to it immediately, lest your silence be taken as consent and actions then are taken that implicate you when they are discovered.
30. Body and spirit were blessed and married by the two Hands of GOD that each might learn from the other – from the body, patience and good order, and from the spirit, courage and freedom.

31. Reduce your share in the half-life of fleeing and chasing things. From this tiny antscape of endless fears and desires, escape aloft, where love of truth reveals the original vast Godscape of your birth.
32. How much in us is waste, and how little is there worth saving! GOD shakes the two apart by death, then sets them side by side on Resurrection Day. So do not fail to take the side of what He saves!
33. Most spiritual exhaustion and religious excesses stem from trying to stuff feats that saints are said to have achieved into vessels many sizes too small for them. Know your capacity and respect it.
34. There are things in this world that are not of this world. If you live, fight, and die for such things, you are one of them. Look for them in this world, and in yourself, and you will find blessedness.
35. Femininity and masculinity are distinctive treble and bass notes that can only delight the ear by contrast. The war against them invites us to a performance where the only sound is white noise.
36. Do not choose a religion by how much you, in your corrupt state, like it. Select your faith as you would your parents; you need a mother to nourish your virtues, and a father to chastise your vices.
37. Your duty is not what GOD compels you to, but His Desire that you compel your hands, tongue, and heart to serve your love of truth and mercy as He has compelled the sun and rain to serve you.
38. The path to GOD is infinite in length, so simply being on it means more than how far you go. A few easy steps in the right direction are infinitely better than brilliant victories that end in the abyss.
39. A decision that ignores Divine Authority and Judgement is null and void. Believers, therefore, may not legitimize decisions ostensibly based on majority rule or custom (i.e., decided by money).
40. GOD is the Truth. His revelation is likewise known as the truth. It is His greatest gift to mankind, and so must be free equally to all. One who sets a price for teaching it earns the wrath of the Giver.
41. When GOD wants to open your heart to Him, He may turn a key of guilt in you. Repent and be forgiven, but do not seek some consolation project to effect ‘closure.’ It is the openness He wants.

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42. With each bitterness of failure and success denied, the worldly may learn again to miss their home in GOD. The wise few, however, hasten to the Giver even more when tasting joy than feeling pain.
  43. Envy not the rich, the mighty, and the famous. Success has swollen their souls like balloons; to keep their height above you, they must turn with the weakest breeze and fear the slightest pinprick.
  44. One who prayed for aid believes that GOD came when the aid arrived. But GOD was nearer to her when her voice was breaking; her cries of need were better for her than her sighs of relief after.
  45. To worship GOD is the acme of rationality. Why? We know not what is just in each situation, but we know that GOD is Just. We do not know what will work out best for us, but we know that what GOD does is for the best. We do not know everything, but we know that GOD is All-Knowing.
  46. This world's pleasures are cheap and fleeting; GOD scatters them like overripe fruit. His promises, however, are seeds for an orchard; faith plants them here, and harvests their fruit in the Everafter.
  47. Self-awareness is a fine art. Be too exacting, and never leave port. Be too self-confident, and storms of hubris will sink you. Fill your sails with hope, but know your ship, your cargo, and the weather.
  48. If you have honesty, you have enough. Do not pursue happiness, for it already has too many suitors. Rather seek what happiness itself is seeking, namely the truth, and you will find it waiting there.
  49. You cannot love honesty without an equal hatred of lies. If there is any lie you treasure in your heart, then know that GOD will not appear to you until you cast it out and see that it was Hell.
  50. When you come up against a sea of woes, turn to GOD for help; He may part the sea for you. But if He postpones its parting, know that your turning to Him far outweighs the woes of that sea.

## 50.

### A PARTING ADMONITION



*Go down and tell them what you saw in this clear space —  
The blazing blue of sky stretched out beneath GOD's Face.*

*Go down: such is the firm resolve of your own heart.  
We fear the worst, and so have told you how to start.*

*If on that dark and sloppy sea of squirming sensuality,  
Where bodies rise and gasp and roll and plunge and die, you keep your soul  
In unison with this pure tone you heard above,  
And speak to them of GOD and demonstrate His Love ...*

*Then we shall bring you back to what you lost,  
And pay you double what your efforts cost.  
And it shall be forgotten that your proud heart  
Was what had for so long kept us apart.*

I have accomplished what I set out to do in the Prologue, namely to help at least one person on the way to GOD. That person is myself. From a mass of restless and unfocused thoughts I have distilled an intellectual structure that constitutes, at least for me, the core of a coherent, albeit incomplete, outlook on everything *beneath GOD's Face*. I have uncovered, for myself at least, a meaningful, motivating interface with the Qur'ān — an interface that not only can generate 'children' like it but also serve to clarify the outlines of my ongoing spiritual development.

It seems boastful to say that 'I' have done this. The truth of the matter is that GOD has done this for me. All my abilities are from Him, by Him, and in Him. But to declare that GOD has done this could lead to an even greater misunderstanding. Some may construe such wording to mean that I am claiming some special connection to or dispensation from GOD, or

that this book is divinely inspired and therefore free of error. No, I only want to say that, whoever the real actor in the performance is, this particular work is done, and has achieved much of what I originally intended by it. And GOD be praised for that result.

Why are we here? To be *in unison*, by deed, word, thought, and feeling, with some heavenly harmony that we heard long ago – before time, if that can be conceived – and even now are sensible of its vibrations in us. Then why that distance? Ah, but its distance is mere seeming; that harmony is ‘in’ us as nothing else is. Then why the illusion of distance? Because the overcoming of it by Immediate Reality creates such an exquisite intensity of feeling, inspired by yearning, evocative of life, and culminating in joy! It was worth the pain, to have that Infinite Pleasure rush in to fill the void. It was an illusion He allowed us to invent so that He might dispel it – a darkness assumed, that His Light might be so much more enlightening in the end.

The Truth is only a step away, if only we would turn to take it. I have found the taking of that step to be the longest, hardest, and most baffling challenge I have ever faced. The Qur’ān demands it of me in terms that are alternately imperious, imploring, implicit, and impossible to fathom. And I struggle even now; it is not yet done with me. I pause here, at the conclusion of this book, but the demands of the Qur’ān continue. And at the moment of death, if I am conscious, it will come to me and say, ‘Forget what you have been doing all these years. Why rehearse your useless self-talk in the antechamber of One Who knows you (and Whom you know) better than you know yourself? The only question that concerns you at this instant is, “What am I doing right now?”’

Some may think it reasonable to counter with, ‘What can you possibly do at the moment of death?’ To that my reply is, ‘The greatest deed a human being can undertake at any time in life.’

عَنْ أَبِي هُرَيْرَةَ، قَالَ سَأَلَ رَجُلٌ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ أَى  
الْأَعْمَالِ أَفْضَلُ قَالَ إِيْمَانٌ بِاللَّهِ

*From Abī Hurairah, who said, ‘A man asked the Messenger of AL-LĀH (may GOD bless him and grant him peace), “What deeds are best?” He replied, “Faith in AL-LĀH.”’*

*(Sunanun-Nasā’ī, Book 25, Hadith 46)*

The *ḥadīth* goes on to mention other deeds in descending order, but on your deathbed there is nothing better, and virtually nothing else worth mentioning. If you are ‘doing’ faith at death – and if that faith is for GOD

alone, not in yourself, your legacy, et cetera – then you are doing very well indeed.

I consider this book, and anything else I may be allowed to write hereafter, little else than getting dressed and going over my lines for that all-important first interview. And I had better do that now, because I do not know what my number is, or when I will be called.

Some may consider focusing on that crucial point in life to be morbid, life-denying, or obsessive. On the contrary, I think this state of ‘high alert’ for death not only provides a clear scale of priorities and a long-term strategy for self-development but also enhances the value, clarity, and beauty of every living moment with the thought that this could be the last, as referred to after Chapter 30:

*Then I saw the open gates, where handsome Death smiles and waits,  
What the purpose is they serve, drawing up to every nerve,  
Every Doom-delaying moment of elation and verve.*

*In this land, since now I know how the golden blossoms grow,  
Why the hand of the breeze and its painful sharpness please,  
All my sense-seconds seem fresh and fairer than a dream.*

I say “the last,” but a true perspective on death is that it is merely a dark passageway, such as one we have all passed painfully through, to a new birth so brilliant that our petty preoccupations here will be forgotten as shadows of a nearly unreal past – a dream that dissipates a few moments after waking. And all that preparation of faith will suddenly appear to be the most rational program we ever signed up for.

Given its absolute importance, faith in GOD is what I lack the most, and consequently what I have made the centrepiece of my book. All other topics discussed herein are like spokes to its hub. There are many other issues in the Qur’ān I could have spoken about – women, slavery, war, banking, and government come to mind. I am fully aware of the controversies regarding all of these. And I know that followers of the Qur’ān are asked to ‘follow’ so many other things these days that discussions and decisions about our current set of challenges are indeed relevant and urgent. But lacking a firm, vibrant, and intelligent faith in GOD, all these other topics produce nothing but hand-waving, tongue-wagging, and copious amounts of fire and smoke. Out of a disproportionate fear of losing ground on such matters, the priceless core is insensibly lost. No other gains can compensate for that loss.



The reader who seeks technically authoritative decrees about faith (i.e., in terms of *fiqh*) or an impeccable academic presentation with all its accoutrements (e.g., a compendious bibliography and the standard mode of presentation) will not be pleased with this book, and I accept their necessarily negative remarks. As I indicated in Chapter 38, this book was written with my End in mind, AL-LĀH being not only The First critic I have to please but also The Last to be offended if I manage to blurt out what brings me closer to Him. That was my main purpose, and I only impart this work to others on the off-chance that a few readers might share that purpose and benefit from my efforts to express it.

I could say so much more, but just as it takes courage to face one's end, it takes wisdom to recognize that a good ending is one that welcomes its proper time. Such a time is now, and so I salute my patient readers with a fond 'Goodbye,' which is only a contraction for the lovely English prayer of 'God (or GOD) be with you.' And remember: if AL-LĀH is all you have, you have it all.



# APPENDICES



## APPENDIX I

# THE QUR'ĀN AS GOD'S SPEECH



At the beginning of this book, I said that we know GOD better than we know ourselves. We do know GOD, but not in the way we think. Intellectually, we fail constantly, but we know Him well enough by how we feel. We ‘know’ (i.e., feel and identify) the absolutes that form and guide our lives, and hence can readily, if not completely, imagine a Being Who constitutes the culmination of these absolutes. And so, in a *ḥadīth qudsī*, we read: ***AL-LĀH The Most High says: “I am present at the thought my servant has of me, and I am with him when he remembers Me.”***

AL-LĀH, however, is not the combination of these absolutes, but rather their origin. He is Absolutely One Being, who expresses these absolutes to us, according to our need or nature, as signs of Who He is. He is free of any form of plurality; whatever multiplicity is attributed to Him, such as His Names, are concessions to the variety and limitations in ourselves and how our minds work.

We know what mercy is, for example, and can feel the attraction of Infinite Mercy, but we can only understand or explain Infinite Mercy in ways that distinguish it from, say, Infinite Knowledge. Such distinctions violate the condition of GOD’s Infinite Unicity.

We are beings in whom mercy and knowledge are clearly compartmentalized. We experience the effects of each so differently that we must distinguish them. This experience is what enables us to mentally process them or competently discuss them, but it comes at the cost of perfect unity – the Unity that only AL-LĀH possesses. We are composite, partible beings, and will remain so until we return to Him.

GOD’s Beautiful Names, mentioned in **Q59:24** and elsewhere in the Qur’ān, are a concession to this partibility in us, and reflect how our minds are built to compartmentalize reality. There is, however, no divisibility in Him. His Mercy is not a separate power or entity from His Knowledge, from His Wrath, from His Vastness, from His Independence, and so on. The same Power that appears as Mercy to one person manifests as Wrath to another. He does not change from one moment to the next, or from one

person to the next. Rather it is we who change as we move through His Light, like planets orbiting the sun, discovering more aspects of Him with every new station on our path.

We cannot understand how these different qualities are combined and harmonized in one simple Unity, nor do we need to. We have His Highest Name, AL-LĀH, and we are ordered to worship Him Alone, as One and All in One, and nothing else. We worship Him as a Transcendental Suprapersonal Person, not a comprehensible thing, and we interact with Him as a whole and single Being, rather than a bundle of attributes.

The purpose of worship is to activate the heart – the spiritual faculty that sees in GOD a Unity impenetrable by the mind. By this Unity, we ‘know’ that He does not delegate His Justice to one concern while His Mercy works elsewhere, or switch His mode of Being from Hearing to Seeing. We can ‘see,’ by this Unity, that He is directly and intimately involved in everything in a way beyond our comprehension, for there are more of His attributes manifested in every act of His than we can imagine. We are ‘aware,’ somehow, that He is Eternal, even though His Eternity appears to us in time. And so it is that our notions of Him are forever incommensurable with Who He really is. Yet he continues to occupy our hearts when we remember Him, and as we think of Him.

Consider the figure of the King – the King of fables and parables. His entire kingdom strains to catch and register his slightest turn or gesture. When he smiles, every subject sees that smile from his or her own experience and inner standpoint. To one person, it simply means approval, but to another it is a veiled warning, a subtle reproof. Others detect aloofness, contentment, a suggestion, or an invitation, each depending on his or her station and circumstances. A courtier close to the King would tell us, if we asked, that all those messages were meant, each for its particular recipient ... and yet the smile was perfectly singular. In essence one, it produced countless effects, encompassing not only those who witnessed it but all denizens of the kingdom. Inconceivably vast and undivided in its attention, the King’s smile was nonetheless unfathomably minute in its intention, right down to the tiniest dust mote, and still incomprehensibly one – **And Our Command is single, like a glance of sight (Q54:50).**

This **Command** marks the limit of our reason. Our knowledge of The Absolute beyond that takes the form of faith – an affirmation or inner certainty that it is so without being able to tell how. The uncontaminated human heart leaps to this conclusion because of its *fiṭrah*, its natural constitution and origin in Unity. By this same Unity, and particularly in our hearts, AL-LĀH acts and expresses Himself directly, without the aid of any of the multiplicities we need to mentally identify those acts.



Due to the pressure of debate with questioners inside and outside Islam, however, theologians have resorted to reasoned explanation of the connection between GOD and man. As a result, and perhaps inevitably, they have fallen into the habit of referring to what He calls His Names as 'attributes.' The word 'attribute' as a noun is not found in the Qur'ān, but only as a verb, and almost always with a clearly negative connotation. The shift in theological discourse from 'Names' to 'Attributes' is a significant one, as we shall see. It reflects a desire or need to reproduce in our hitherto unitary image of GOD the multiplicity of our concepts and understandings. He mentions His Face, His Eyes, His Hands, His Footstool, and even His Shin, but the noun 'attribute' and similar terms preferred by theologians are absent.

By referring only to His Names as descriptors of His identity, GOD seems to have set a limit on how we can discuss in detail Who He is, what He possesses, and how He acts. We address Him and talk about Him according to our cursory understandings, based on the diversity of our experiences and concepts, with the Qur'ān revealed as a guide to what our terms and referents should be. If He considered 'attributes,' 'qualities,' or 'characteristics' to be necessary for this discourse, He would certainly have shown us how to go about using them. But this particular gate was closed until Muslim theologians opened it.

I believe that the careless reification of 'attributes' as the term appears in Islamic texts is a step too far, with unfortunate consequences for our conception of the pure, ineffable Unicity of GOD. My own use of 'qualities,' 'character,' or 'nature' in this book is a reluctant concession to how we normally think and speak when GOD's Attributes (*ṣifāt*) are meant, but without admitting the metaphysical baggage that *ṣifāt* has acquired, namely as actual entities adhering or superadded to Him. (In the same way, in Chapter 7, I refer to "good," which would otherwise be considered to be a 'real' Attribute of GOD, as a *quale* – uncreated because it is not a 'thing' at all, but rather an adjective signifying 'GOD-like' and metaphorically attributed to 'goods'.)

We describe GOD by Himself, by what He has, and by what He does. None of these three modes actually defines Him, but is more like a reflection of ourselves and our understanding of how to be a person. His Names are tokens of these modes, such as being High (Al-'Alī), having Knowledge (Al-'Alīm), or causing death (Al-Mumīt). There is nothing categorical about these modes, nor are His Names particularly systematic.

They are simply the linguistic way-stations He knows we need in our journey towards a lively, loving, and memorable relationship with Him. We could use nouns, such as Forgiveness and Knowledge, and call them His Attributes, but there is no metaphysical necessity to do so, since we could also rephrase such descriptions as adjectives and call Him Forgiving and Knowing, or employ verbs and say that He forgives us and knows us.

Most of His Names in Arabic are, grammatically speaking, both nouns and adjectives, the prime exception being His ‘Proper’ Name, “AL-LĀH,” for which there is no corresponding adjective. If we were to turn linguistics into metaphysics, we could say that “AL-LĀH” is the Greatest Noun, ruling over His other Names as a noun does over adjectives, and acting in this world by verbs.

قُلْ ادْعُوا اللَّهَ أَوْ ادْعُوا الرَّحْمَنَ أَيًّا مَا تَدْعُوا فَلَهُ الْأَسْمَاءُ الْحُسْنَى

Say, “Call to GOD (AL-LĀH) or call The Gracious (Ar-Raḥmān). Howsoever you may call Him, His are the most Beautiful Names.” (Q17:110)

In pondering the wisdom (and beauty) of using names, rather than attributes, I remember that old saying I heard as a child: ‘Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.’ In other words, the names you call me do not affect who I essentially am. Attributes, on the other hand, are not just what you call me, but claim to be what I actually have. Rather than accepting their distance from reality, as conventional markers that need not be entirely accurate or complete, attributes seek to burrow down into their referent, suggesting that what they describe is distinctively, undeniably ‘there’ to some degree.

Besides the unrestricted use of the term ‘attribute’ to posit some divine entity, another unfortunate innovation in *kalām*, or early Islamic scholastic theology, is the concept of *dhāt*, or essence. Once again, the word does not appear with this particular meaning in the Qur’ān, nor was it used by the Prophet (God’s blessings and peace be upon him) or his companions, but began to be utilized as Muslims encountered Greek philosophy and the arguments that arose therefrom. GOD’s Essence – that is, His Unitary Being – came to be contrasted with His Attributes, generating more confusion.

Islamic discussions of essence (or substance) and attributes are the outcome of Muslims’ encounters with Greco-Christian theology, which had become expert in grappling with questions surrounding the consubstantiality or consubstantiality of the Son with the Father. The core of such issues is where to draw the line between what is attributed to God, and is



therefore eternal, and what is attributed to the created world, and is therefore temporal. In Christianity, these debates were focused on the person of Jesus (‘Īsā, on whom be peace) and to what extent he was human and/or divine. The Qur’ān is emphatic in assigning him a created status like that of other humans –

لَقَدْ كَفَرَ الَّذِينَ قَالُوا إِنَّ اللَّهَ هُوَ الْمَسِيحُ ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ قُلْ فَمَنْ يَمْلِكُ مِنَ اللَّهِ شَيْئًا إِنْ أَرَادَ أَنْ يُهْلِكَ الْمَسِيحَ ابْنَ مَرْيَمَ وَأُمَّهُ وَمَنْ فِي الْأَرْضِ جَمِيعًا وَلِلَّهِ مُلْكُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا يَخْلُقُ مَا يَشَاءُ وَاللَّهُ عَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ

Those are in denial who have said, “Indeed AL-LĀH is the Messiah, son of Maryam.” Say, “Then who could contravene AL-LĀH in any way if He intended to demolish the Messiah, son of Maryam, and his mother, and all who are on earth?” To GOD belongs the Kingdom of the heavens and the earth and that which is between them. He creates whatever He so wills. And GOD has power over everything. (Q5:17)

– while naming him as His Word and a Spirit from Him:

إِنَّمَا الْمَسِيحُ عِيسَى ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ وَكَلِمَتُهُ أُلْقَاهَا إِلَى مَرْيَمَ وَرُوحٌ مِنْهُ فَآمِنُوا بِاللَّهِ وَرُسُلِهِ وَلَا تَقُولُوا ثَلَاثَةٌ انْتَهُوا خَيْرًا لَكُمْ إِنَّمَا اللَّهُ إِلَهٌ وَاحِدٌ سُبْحَانَهُ أَنْ يَكُونَ لَهُ وَلَدٌ لَهُ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ وَكَفَى بِاللَّهِ وَكِيلًا

Truly the Messiah, ‘Īsā, son of Maryam, is a messenger of GOD, His Word that He discharged to Maryam, and a Spirit from Him. So have faith in GOD and in His messengers, and say not “Trinity.” Desist; it would be better for you. Verily AL-LĀH is One God only. He is Transcendentally Beyond His having progeny. To Him belong the contents of the heavens and the earth. And He suffices as Trustee. (Q4:171)

These names – Messiah, Messenger of GOD, Word of GOD, and Spirit from GOD – are honorifics that elevate ‘Īsā (peace be upon him) without erasing his basic status as a created being, spoken into existence like all creatures, and infused with GOD’s Spirit like all humans. The fierce controversies that were taking place in Christianity concerning the single or dual nature of Jesus are peremptorily dismissed. The various titles bestowed on him are not allowed to either render him divine or obscure the fundamental Unicity of AL-LĀH.

One of the reasons the identity of Christ posed a problem for Christians was the intellectual milieu in which it arose, which was dominated by the philosophy of Aristotle. When Islamic theologians first began to debate their opponents about the nature of GOD and His relationship with His creation, they found that the groundwork for such disputes had already been laid out for them in Aristotelian terms. Even thinkers such as Al-Ghazzālī, who was critical of the carelessness and impiety that philosophy could lead to, felt constrained to frame their polemics in the style of their adversaries, for want of alternative terms and concepts.

In his *Metaphysics* and other works<sup>35</sup>, Aristotle's primary concern is his inquiry into substance. One might say that his entire philosophy revolves around this concept "in virtue of the fact that they are the entities which underlie everything else, and that everything else is either predicated of them or present in them" (*Categories*, Book 1, Chapter 5 (2b)). In *Physics*, Book 1, Chapter 2 (185a), he says, "For none of the others [i.e., quantity and quality] can exist independently; substance alone is independent: for everything is predicated of substance as subject." More emphatically in *Metaphysics*, Book XII, Chapter 1 (1069a), Aristotle lays out the basic framework of his ontology:

The subject of our inquiry is substance; for the principles and the causes we are seeking are those of substances. For if the universe is of the nature of a whole, substance is its first part; and if it coheres merely by virtue of serial succession, on this view also substance is first, and is succeeded by quality, and then by quantity. At the same time these latter are not even being in the full sense, but are qualities and movements of it ... Further, none of the categories other than substance can exist apart. And the early philosophers also in practice testify to the primacy of substance; for it was of substance that they sought the principles and elements and causes.

Aristotle asserts that "it is to that which is one with a thing or substance, as also to substance itself, that 'individuality' and 'being' are deemed to belong in the fullest sense" (*On Sophistical Refutations*, Chapter 7 (169a)). This equivalence of thing or substance is not accidental; virtually all of his examples of substances are material things. Plato's Forms, therefore, (and my absolutes) are not things.

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<sup>35</sup> Aristotle, from Volume 8 of the *Great Books of the Western World*. Specific references are cited in the text.

If, then, no universal can be a substance, as has been said in our discussion of substance and being, and if being itself cannot be a substance in the sense of a one apart from the many (for it is common to the many), but is only a predicate, clearly unity also cannot be a substance; for being and unity are the most universal of predicates (*Metaphysics*, Book X, Chapter 2 (1053b)).

He goes on to say "That the one, then, in every class is a definite thing" (*Metaphysics*, Book X, Chapter 2 (1054a)).

Things are literally essential to Aristotle's identification of them with substances.

Each thing itself, then, and its essence are one and the same in no merely accidental way, as is evident from both the preceding arguments and because to know each thing, at least, is just to know its essence, so that even by the exhibition of instances it becomes clear that both must be one (*Metaphysics*, Book VII, Chapter 6 (1031b)).

Furthermore, "essence belongs to substances either alone or chiefly and primarily and in the unqualified sense." (*Metaphysics*, Book VII, Chapter 5 (1031a)).

We have, then, in Aristotle, a fundamentally materialistic, thing-centred view of reality, in which essence = thing = substance. His disquisition, however much it meanders (but the works we have in his name are lecture notes, and so the fault in composition may not be his), is overwhelming in its thoroughness and minuteness. There can be little doubt as to why his intellect towered over not only the Classical world and Medieval Europe but also nascent Islamic philosophy. And it did not stop at philosophy; he had this to say as well: "We must assert that it is necessary that there should be an eternal unmovable substance. For substances are the first of existing things, and if they are all destructible, then all things are destructible" (*Metaphysics*, Book XII, Chapter 6 (1071b)). He then works his way up to his description of God, and concludes his demonstration of the necessity of a First Mover by saying "It is clear then from what has been said that there is a substance which is eternal and unmovable and separate from sensible things" (*Metaphysics*, Book XII, Chapter 7 (1073a)). This idea of God as a substance – in other words, a thing – would have profoundly detrimental effects upon the formulation of theological doctrines in Islam.

In his *Ihyā 'Ulūmid-Dīn*, Al-Ghazzālī provides the standard 'Asharī

defence of the orthodox position, including the belief in a Qur'ān that is, like God, "eternal and unmovable and separate from sensible things." In the following passage,<sup>36</sup> we can see how he employs the concept of essence to facilitate this transformation both in AL-LĀH and in the Qur'ān:

Sixth: that God, the Transcendent and Most High, is a Speaker by means of speech, which is a characteristic that is founded upon His Essence, without sound or letter. His speech does not resemble the speech of any other thing, just as His Existence does not resemble any other thing. Real Speech is speech of the self. Sounds are broken down into letters as indicators of meaning, just as movements and gestures are on occasion. ... If it is understood that He has a Single Knowledge, by which He knows all existents, then understand [another] Single Attribute of the Essence, and that is Speech by which is meant all that expressions indicate.

And if it is understood that the existence of the seven heavens and the existence of Paradise and Hell are written down on a small sheet of paper, retained within an atom-sized particle of the heart, and that all of that is seen within the confines of the cornea without the essences of the heavens and the earth, Paradise, and Hell actually occupying the eye, the heart, and the page, then understand the existence of speech that is recited by the tongue, retained by the heart, and written in texts without the essence of that speech occupying them. If the essence of speech was actually present on a page of the Book of God, then the Essence of God the Most High would be present in the writing of His Name on the page, and there too would appear the essence of the Fire by writing its name upon the page, and so would burn it.

When Aristotle declared, as cited above, that "Each thing itself, then, and its essence are one and the same," he certainly could not have imagined the lengths to which Al-Ghazzālī would go with that equivalence. We are to understand from the above quotation that speech is no longer something that is heard, read, or memorized, but is essentially abstracted from its manifestations to the realm of "Real Speech," which for God means a kind of Divine Internal Monologue, "as a characteristic that is founded upon His Essence." Note how he distinguishes in the last sentence between

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<sup>36</sup> Al-Ghazzālī, *Iḥyā' 'Ulūmīd-Dīn*, Book of Worship, Foundations of Doctrine, Chapter 2, Section 3, Second Pillar, Sixth Principle.

the essence of speech, which is not "present on a page," and the Essence of God, which is not "present in the writing of His Name on the page." By this he shows us that God and His Speech are two different things – an issue to which I will return.

To protect the Qur'ān from attacks and place it beyond doubt, Islamic theologians have resorted, as we see Al-Ghazzālī doing here, to 'making room' for it in God's Eternal Presence. This requires a dual process of conceptual extension, like two distant nerve cells reaching out with their axons to close the synaptic gap between them and establish contact. The gap between what is meant by "God" and what is meant by "the Qur'ān" is bridged on the one side by reifying God's Attributes as eternal things, and on the other side by etherealizing the Qur'ān until it is just about the same as a Divine Attribute.

In the quotation above, the common conception of speech is broken down into its material components, such as written letters and spoken sounds, on the one hand, and their abstract or essence, on the other hand. All things, of course, could be similarly analyzed into their essences and their phenomenal manifestations, but speech gets this 'dual nature' treatment in order to extend the axon of its being (and hence the Qur'ān's being as well) towards Divinity. "Real speech is speech of the self," or in this case the Internal Speech of God, which means that it is no longer what we actually read or hear, but has been **raised to Him** (which is the wording of 'Īsā's ascension in **Q4:158**).

Let us see now how Al-Ghazzālī has been building the bridge from God's side:

Tenth: that God, Most High, is Knowing by Knowledge, Living by Life, Powerful by Power, Willing by Will, Speaking by Speech, Hearing by Audition, and Seeing by Vision, and the characteristics of these Attributes are Eternal. And he who says, 'Knowing without Knowledge' is like him saying 'Wealthy without wealth,' and 'Knowledge without knowing,' and 'Knowing without what is known.' For truly knowledge, what is known, and the knower are all necessary to each other, like murder, the murdered, and the murderer. Just as a murderer cannot be imagined without murder or a murder victim, nor a murder victim without a murderer or a murder, so likewise knowing [or a knower] cannot be imagined without knowledge, nor knowledge without what is known, nor what is known without a knower. Rather these three are mutually implicated by reason. One part cannot be severed from any other part.

Whoever allows for the knower to be sundered from knowledge must allow its separation from what is known and the separation of knowledge from the one who knows, since there is no division among these qualities.

Superficially, this seems reasonable enough, but there is actually enough material here to sink an argument for the Qur'ān being coeternal with AL-LĀH. We can put that aside momentarily, however, to observe what Al-Ghazzālī is doing to our understanding of God's nature.

What is the point of saying by what He is Knowing, Living, Willing, et cetera? Surely these Names are sufficient to tell us Who He is and how He acts. Obviously, Al-Ghazzālī intends to exploit these adjectival Names to summon forth a corresponding set of nouns, which are then attached to God as Attributes, or what Aristotle would call predicates, such as "being and unity." AL-LĀH is Eternal, and so must the Names be that reflect Who He eternally is. But names are not attributes, nor do they signify anything new or different in Him; they are nothing more than words describing One Reality. The holiness or beauty of GOD's Beautiful Names depends solely on their Absolute Referent, not what they are in themselves. With the use of nouns, however, Al-Ghazzālī is no longer naming God Himself, but entities He has, and by which He acts. In reality, of course, 'He sees' and 'He sees by vision' amount to the same thing, since 'by vision' is redundant. But for Al-Ghazzālī such redundancy is necessary insofar as it allows him to plant Aristotelian things or substances where before there was only ineffable Unicity. Thanks to this displacement, God is no longer directly present to us in Who He is or what He does. He has become "separate from sensible things," as Aristotle envisaged Him. And Eternity now has 'features,' or room for 'inserts.'

With the bridge of Speech thus extended from either bank, the divine and the temporal, Al-Ghazzālī can finish his construction in the middle<sup>37</sup>:

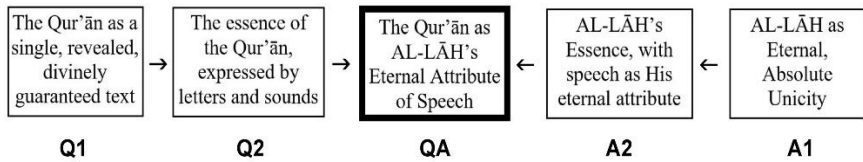
Seventh: that Speech, standing on its own, is Pre-Existent, and so are all His Attributes, it being impossible that He provide a place for what is temporal and subject to change. Rather what is necessary for the Essence is necessary, in terms of pre-existence, for the Attributes, so neither do changes affect them nor do they give place to occurrences. He remains Pre-Existing, qualified by Praiseworthy Attributes, and remains Everlasting. Thus is He devoid of change in state, as what gives place to occurrences is not itself free of them.

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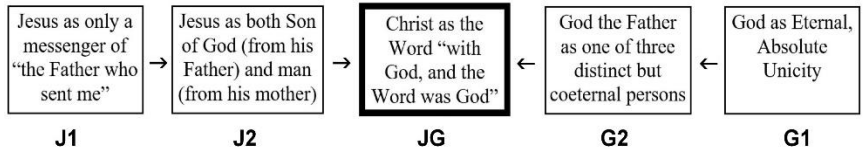
<sup>37</sup> Ibid., Seventh Principle.

And what is not free of occurrences is itself occurring. The quality of occurrence is confirmed only for bodies, as they are affected by change and variation of attributes. How can their Creator take part with them in accepting change? Thus it is that His Speech is Pre-Existent, based on His Essence. What is newly occurring is only the sounds that indicate it.

Schematically, Al-Ghazzālī's deification of the Qur'ān could be portrayed thus:



Compare this with how Christians reframe the person of Jesus to be equivalent to God:



Al-Ghazzālī begins where all Muslims begin, namely the affirmation of the Qur'ān as the Word of GOD (Q1) and AL-LĀH as The Absolutely One, Eternal GOD (A1). Let us look at what transformations he requires to move from A1 to A2, from Q1 to Q2, and from A2 and Q2 to QA, and whether they are justified.

From A1 to A2: Reading the Qur'ān, we soon encounter AL-LĀH as a Single, Speaking, Aware, and Powerful Super-Personality Who is both One in Himself and personally engaged with us, His creatures. He is not just any thing or concept, but more of a person than you or I, and clearly breaks the bounds of what philosophy can say about Him. To re-frame Him as an Essence with Attributes, we need to set aside this overwhelming

impression of Personality and break Him down into what Aristotle describes as "an eternal unmovable substance. For substances are the first of existing things."

When I interact with you, I cannot conceptually convert you into a thing with attributes such as speaking and knowing unless I first objectify you. I ignore your inconvenient presence as an independent, feeling subject and place your substance under my own more powerful magnifying glass to determine what you are made of. Substance equals essence, according to Aristotle, and essence implies predicates, such as Unity and Being in the case of God. This is the analytical tool Al-Ghazzālī needs to establish his list of coeternals, such as Knowledge, Life, Power, Will, Speech, Audition, and Vision. Most of these are derived from His Names, such as Al-‘Alīm, Al-Ḥayy, Al-Baṣīr, and As-Samī, while Will and Speech are inferred from verses that describe His actions.

By using these Names, AL-LĀH never implies that there are things such as attributes attached to Him. Rather these Names are used to describe Himself Alone. And if we are content to use His Names only, we will never stray into believing that He is in any way divisible. Likewise, whether I call you by your first name or your family name or your nickname, it is clearly understood that these names all refer to exactly the same person and do not effect any division in who you are, nor are they entities on their own. You and I are partible creatures, but that is not because of the various names we have.

This, however, is not good enough for Al-Ghazzālī. To achieve his list of attributes, he is compelled to convert Al-‘Alīm, The Knowing, a qualifying adjective and one of GOD’s Names, into ‘*ilm*, Knowledge, which is a noun. He does the same for Al-Mutakallim, The Speaking, another Name of GOD (but not in the Qur’ān, nor in the traditional list of 99 Names), converting that into Speech. He does the same for Al-Ḥayy (from Living to Life), Al-Baṣīr (from Seeing to Sight), and As-Samī (from Hearing to Audition).

Can we say that His Names are Attributes? If we do so (reluctantly, and with the utmost caution) we must understand that they are not entities in themselves. We may say that He is Speaking or The Speaker, but can we say that He is Speech? No, we cannot ... but Al-Ghazzālī carries on regardless. Once they are converted into nouns other than Who He is Himself, they also become things that are coeternal with GOD. If we are intent on maintaining GOD’s Unicity, this conversion is superfluous. But if, like Al-Ghazzālī, we are intent on a multiplicity in GOD’s Presence, where He can provide pre-existent places for these coeternal things, then such a conversion is indeed necessary.



The result is a new conception of GOD as an Eternal Essence with Eternal Attributes – something like the Christian Father with the Son and Holy Spirit. This essence-with-attribute combination conforms, as we have seen, to Aristotle's idea of a substance or a thing with its predicates. But then we read:

لَيْسَ كَمِثْلِهِ شَيْءٌ وَهُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْبَصِيرُ

**There is no thing like unto Him, and He is Hearing, Seeing. (Q42:11)**

His unlikeness is not contradicted by His Names, but rather emphasized, for He hears and sees in ways that are inseparable from His Infinite Being. He is The Hearer and The Seer to emphasize that when we use or mention these gifts, which He has mercifully bestowed on us, we may be reminded of their origins in Him as aspects of His Indivisible Awareness. The Aristotelian concept of GOD as a thing or substance is rejected explicitly in this verse, and throughout the Qur'ān, which affirms His being Transcendently Beyond what we ascribe to Him, such as a likeness to things.

From A2 to QA: Having assumed that envisioning AL-LĀH as an Essence with Eternal Attributes does no harm to our faith in the Unicity of GOD, Al-Ghazzālī can launch into the seemingly easier task of designating speech as one of those attributes. But it is in arguing for this point that he reveals the flaw in his theology.

First of all, he quietly passes over the salient distinction between Al-Mutakallim (Speaker) and *Kalām* (Speech). Are they the same? They cannot be, for the former is describing GOD-as-Subject, while the latter is the name of an object, produced by that subject. He admits as much, in his Tenth Principle above, by arguing that we cannot have one without the other, that for every actor, such as a speaker, a corresponding act must be admitted as inseparable from that actor. If the actor is eternal, then his act is likewise eternal. This argument would be unnecessary if actor and act were in fact the same; the transition from Speaker to Speech could then pass without comment. But by taking pains to explain their connection, Al-Ghazzālī is effectually proving the significance of their difference. They are not the same, but they are, he says, nonetheless inseparable.

His principle, in his own words, is that "Speech, standing on its own, is Pre-existent, and so are all His Attributes." Consider, then, this list of Names he fails to mention: Al-Khāliq (The Creator), Al-Bāri' (The Originator), Al-Muṣawwir (The Shaper), Al-Qābiḍ (The Withholder), Al-

Khāfiḍ (The Abaser), Al-Mudhill (The Humiliator), Al-Mubdi' (The Initiator), Al-Mu'id (The Restorer), Al-Mumīt (The Death-Dealer), Al-Muqaddim (The Advancer), Al-Mu'akhkhir (The Delayer), Al-Muntaqim (The Avenger), Al-Māni' (The Denier), Aḍ-Ḍārr (The Distresser), and Al-Baḍi' (The Innovator). If he considers speech a pre-existent attribute, then so are creation, origination, shape, withholding, abasement, humiliation, initiation, repetition, advancement, delay, vengeance, denial, distress, and innovation. All of these are derived from established Names of GOD, and some of them, such as Creator, Originator, Shaper, Avenger, and Innovator, are inscribed in the Qur'ān itself. (Neither Speaker nor Speech, on the other hand, are explicitly mentioned in the Qur'ān as His Names.)

It is patently ludicrous to assert that creation, origination, abasement, distress, innovation, et cetera are pre-existent and coeternal with GOD's Essence. If we accept GOD's Names as signs of what GOD can do in time, rather than as distinct, coeternal entities in their own right, then these Names pose no problem for any serious theologian. But Al-Ghazzālī stumbles further into obvious error by positing a series of eternal trinities:

For truly knowledge, what is known, and the knower are all necessary to each other, like murder, the murdered, and the murderer. Just as a murderer cannot be imagined without murder or a murder victim, nor a murder victim without a murderer or a murder, so likewise knowing [or a knower] cannot be imagined without knowledge, nor knowledge without what is known, nor what is known without a knower.

As I said before, this does look like common sense on the surface. It certainly applies to things and actions of this world by worldly actors. This type of reasoning, however, is demonstrably false in GOD's case. Not only **is no thing like unto Him**, but we simply do not know how Eternal, Infinite Divinity acts in time and space. That is precisely why Names are all He gives us; they are indicators of what is vaguely identifiable for us, not just supernatural versions of human qualities.

Al-Ghazzālī has, by his analogies, almost literally murdered a proper appreciation of what it is to be AL-LĀH. If we use the example of murderer (subject), murder (action), and murdered (object) as mutually dependent entities to argue for the eternity of not only The Speaker (subject), but also of His Speech (action), and what is spoken, or who is spoken to (object), then for Al-Mumīt (The Death-Dealer), one of GOD's Eternal Names, we must posit killing or dying (action) and the dead (object) as

His Eternal Attributes. Either the dead themselves are not dead, for they are eternally with Him, or He Himself is dead, as death and the dead are inseparable from Him.

We can go on to list other Names and discover what an utter travesty this type of reasoning has become, particularly in light of another of His Names, the Independent – **for verily AL-LĀH is Independent of the worlds (Q3:97)**. His independence is directly related to the fact that He is Eternal, Unaffected by change and what is changed by Him, while all other things, including known things and murder victims, are dependent for their being on knowers and murderers.

Finally, when action and the object of action are necessarily coeternal with the Subject, as Speech is said to be coeternal with the Speaker, and as Knowledge and what is known inseparable from the Knower, we discover that for GOD to be an Eternal Knower, according to Al-Ghazzālī, He must have not only Eternal Knowledge but also eternal objects of knowledge. By this view, The Pre-Existent Creator does not actually create, for not only creation but His creatures are pre-existent. He is The Originator, and yet He is not, for the objects of His origination are eternal like Him. Not only does He cause death, but to be The Death-Dealer He also depends on death, which He then assigns to the eternally dead. And so on into silliness on a galactic scale.

There is, in short, no end to the folly in this seemingly small step of making His Speech Eternal because being a Speaker requires it. Rather than wallow further in this shame and confusion, let us step back and state succinctly what the obvious solution to this dilemma is.

AL-LĀH as GOD-the-Subject is Unqualified, Unknowable, and Unnameable. That we might 'know' Him as GOD-the-Object, He has revealed His Names. These Names do not in any way define Who He is, what He has, or how He acts; rather they are merely indicators of how his Indivisible Personality appears or should appear to us. They delineate the boundaries of acceptable discourse concerning Him. Any qualities He is said to have, such as 'Good,' 'Knowledge,' 'Speech,' and so on are qualia; they are not entities in themselves, but various descriptions of His One Light. When we have "AL-LĀH" as the One True Noun, then all His other Names 'serve' as adjectives. 'Speaking' should be rephrased as 'The Speaking GOD' or at the very most 'GOD The Speaker' instead of converting its adjectival status into a separate noun, Speech, and giving it the illicit status of an Attribute. In this way, we maintain His Unicity while identifying what we call His acts in the world without mediating substances or things. He Alone can 'act' in this way. That is part of what it

means to be GOD.

From Q1 to Q2: Our experience of the Qur'ān, as with all texts, is multidimensional. While seeing letters on the page or hearing sounds in the air, we are extracting from these physical phenomena an immaterial series of meanings. Using Aristotle's terminology, we are asked to consider the meanings to be the essence or substance of the Qur'ān, and its written or spoken manifestations to be its predicates or accidents. For Aristotle, the essence is the thing itself, underlying whatever qualities, including being, unity, quantity, and quality, that are attributed to it. Al-Ghazzālī confirms this: "then understand the existence of speech that is recited by the tongue, retained by the heart, and written in texts without the essence of that speech occupying them." A line is drawn through the Qur'ān between what it essentially is, which is not present on the page, and what it appears to be in its broken-down state, namely written letters and audible sounds. We know where to see the letters or hear the sounds, but where is this essence of the Qur'ān, the "thing itself"? The answer to that, of course, is obtained by following the transition from Q2 to QA.

But before we go there, how valid or significant is this division of the Qur'ān between its essence and its non-essentials, between the immaterial reality and its physical expression? We have seen how Al-Ghazzālī divides AL-LĀH into His Essence and His Attributes on the analogy of how material things can be analyzed into essence and attributes. This dissection is unbefitting the Transcendent Unicity of GOD. But in the case of things that are not GOD, such a division may be appropriate. The human being has a material component, which is created, and a spiritual component, or *rūh*, which is from GOD's own Breath or Spirit, constituting His 'aspiration' for us. Ordinary objects have not only physical / material elements but also symbolic meanings attached to them. Nothing is devoid of meaning. Words, likewise, could be said to have bodies, namely how they sound when spoken or look when written, and souls, i.e., what they signify or indicate. So it is conceivable that the Qur'ān has a similar structure, being partly material and partly mental.

This composite nature of the Qur'ān should not be controversial; Al-Ghazzālī himself characterizes GOD's Speech in this fashion. Even proponents of the view that the Qur'ān is uncreated had to concede that anything involving a succession of components, such as one letter or sound following another, is *ḥādīth*, temporal, and therefore created. To assert that the Qur'ān itself was uncreated, therefore, they had to be especially emphatic about the essence of the Qur'ān as "Real Speech."

To understand the magnitude of this bifurcation, let us return to the analogy of the human being. Human bodies are clearly created; creation is the term GOD uses for bringing material substances into being. But the spirit breathed into them is said to be **His Spirit (Q32:9)**. One could argue that, by being **His**, this spirit is uncreated. Nonetheless, the whole human being and the whole of humanity are said to be created. No theologian disputes the term, despite the undoubted presence of GOD's Spirit in this composite being.

Why, then, were orthodox theologians from as early as the second century of the Islamic era (about 700 C.E. onwards) so concerned to deny that the Qur'ān, likewise, was created? Why did sober, competent scholars like Al-Ghazzālī feel compelled to undergo the intellectual contortions that are so painful to see in the incongruities quoted above?

When we reread the following quotation, it becomes apparent what the problem for them was:

The quality of occurrence is confirmed only for bodies, as they are affected by change and variation of attributes. How can their Creator take part with them in accepting change? Thus it is that His Speech is Pre-Existent, based on His Essence. What is newly occurring is only the sounds that indicate it.

If the Qur'ān were created, it would be just like a body, "affected by change and variation and newly occurring." Admitting this would, in their opinion, totally undermine faith in the Qur'ān as the Word of GOD.

AL-LĀH does not explicitly state that the Qur'ān is created, for the passive verb "created" (*khuliqa*) is specifically used for bodily phenomena, not for books, which are written, spoken, or inspired. In saying it was uncreated, its defenders clearly feared the implication of its being labelled created, i.e., that it was solely material. For them, there was no third choice between a created, material thing and an immaterial aspect of GOD Himself. How could something be both immaterial and created? In posing such a question, they forgot that angels are made of light, which is one name for the Qur'ān itself (**Q5:15, 7:157**), and that even human creatures have an immaterial aspect, namely GOD's Spirit. Assuming, however, that there is a strict separation between material and immaterial substances, the Qur'ān's defenders wanted it to be on God's side of that divide.

At a time when the canon of statutory traditions (*aḥādīth*) was being established, a text of even greater importance could not be seen as open to the intervention of fallible human beings. The collection of *aḥādīth*, be-

cause of their obviously human provenance, would always contain elements of uncertainty and grounds for dispute. The scholarly community, the arbiters of faith for the Muslim world, therefore required something that would forever be unshakably true, a reference text that required no further reference for its validity. The Qur'ān's own assertions that it was such a text, **free of doubt (Q2:2)**, gave them the courage to proceed, but not the absolute assurance that would have sufficed for them if they had taken such an assertion at face value. They needed to elevate the Qur'ān, not by its own statements of what it was, but by their theories, to the realm of the Divine and make it an attribute of God Himself. In this way, they hoped to put the authority of the Qur'ān as God's Speech beyond change and challenge.

From Q2 to QA: In the transition from A2 to QA, we have seen how Al-Ghazzālī set the stage for the deification of the Qur'ān. He first posited a host of Eternal Attributes that were somehow given a 'place' in His Presence, and then singled out Speech as one of them, ignoring the obvious objection that GOD's Speech is what He produces, not what He Himself is, and hence is analogous to creation and other temporal products of the Divine.

If 'The Speaker,' as a Name of GOD, is eternal, what is wrong with making Speech eternal too? Consider, as an analogous case, 'The Creator' and Creation. GOD is eternally both Speaker and Creator, but this does not mean that He eternally speaks and eternally creates. Rather both actions are voluntary and occasional. They are intentionally directed towards particular objects or words at particular times and places. When we refer to GOD as the Creator, we are describing His Eternal Capacity to create. He does not need to be constantly creating to be The Creator. Such a need would constitute a dependence, while AL-LĀH is transcendently and absolutely Independent. We are constantly reminded that He does not create in all ways at all times, but that He selectively creates – **And what your Master wills and chooses He creates (Q28:68)** – that even the universe is created for a specific period – **AL-LĀH did not create the heavens and the earth and that which is between them other than with truth and an appointed term. (Q30:8)** – and that His creation is willed and timed:

كَذَٰلِكَ اللَّهُ يَخْلُقُ مَا يَشَاءُ إِذَا قَضَىٰ أَمْرًا فَإِنَّمَا يَقُولُ لَهُ كُنْ فَيَكُونُ

**Thus does GOD create what He intends. When He determines an affair, He only tells it "Be!" and so it is. (Q3:47)**

From this verse – and there are many like it – we clearly see that His

Speech is likewise voluntary (**intends**) and occasional (**When**). Creating and speaking here are not actions clearly distinguished as being performed on different objects or at different times. Rather His determining and speaking are cited together as the single method He uses to create. He is not always speaking; that would be too mechanical and mindless, like the Neoplatonic emanation of a Being Who is overflowing with incessant, un-directed chatter. That is not what we mean by speaking to someone, nor is it what GOD means in speaking to us. AL-LĀH is Transcendently Free of such an imputation. Rather He is Free to speak when He wills and to be silent when He wills:

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يَكْتُمُونَ مَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ مِنَ الْكِتَابِ وَيَشْتَرُونَ بِهِ ثَمَنًا قَلِيلًا  
أُولَٰئِكَ مَا يَأْكُلُونَ فِي بُطُونِهِمْ إِلَّا النَّارَ وَلَا يُكَلِّمُهُمُ اللَّهُ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ

**Truly those who hide what GOD has sent down of the Book and sell it for a paltry sum are stuffing nothing but the Fire in their bellies; GOD will not be speaking to them on the Day of Resurrection ... (Q2:174)**

Could we not say, however, as Al-Ghazzālī does in his Seventh Principle, that although the products of GOD's Speech are manifested temporarily in what we hear or see, His "Real Speech" is a pre-existent intention that is coeternal with His Essence? The example he employs (not quoted above) is that of a father who intends for his son to be educated even before his son is born. The real Qur'ān, according to this simile, is not the partible, variegated text we know it to be, but the invisible and pre-existent Thought of GOD from which the countless Words of GOD spring forth like a tree from a seed.

From this idea, however, only problems grow, like weeds. I am reminded of a verse that portrays this relationship:

أَلَمْ تَرَ كَيْفَ ضَرَبَ اللَّهُ مَثَلًا كَلِمَةً طَيِّبَةً كَشَجَرَةٍ طَيِّبَةٍ أَصْلُهَا ثَابِتٌ  
وَفَرْعُهَا فِي السَّمَاءِ

**Do you not see how GOD presents a simile? A goodly word is like a goodly tree; its roots are stable and its branches reach the sky. (Q14:24)**

The **goodly word** is, of course, the Word of GOD. Although **roots** and **branches** are singular in the original Arabic of this verse, we speak of both as plural in English. Unlike the image we might have of GOD's "Real Speech" as a heavenly thought with manifold expressions here on earth, this Qur'ānic tree is growing right way up, from the ground. Its task is to

connect heaven and earth, which is what GOD's Words do: by binding utterances and meanings together they become organic wholes. No matter how lofty a tree may be, it requires a firm footing in the soil of temporal things.

Notice also how the **goodly word** refers to the whole tree – a concrete, partible thing, rather than some intangible extract or essence of it. The Qur'ān almost always refers to itself as a text whose locality, specificity, and multiplicity are integral to its identity. In a few places, we see its heavenly origin affirmed, such as its being **on a guarded Tablet (Q85:22)** – one proof, by the way, that GOD Himself is protecting it from illicit changes. References to vaguely comprehensible entities – Tablet, Pen, Throne, Footstool, et cetera – convey a sense of mysterious grandeur, but if understood as distinct paraphernalia, however ethereal, they are certainly not coeternal items superadded to His Oneness. And nowhere does the Qur'ān divide itself into an ethereal "Real Speech" and a tenuously connected set of worldly accidents. It is, rather, that one organic whole symbolized by the **goodly tree**.

An organic whole, such as a tree, is nonetheless a 'thing' – finite, partible, and non-eternal. We may say that it has, like all things, a single essence, namely its meaning or nature. That essence, however, is not in pre-existent isolation as some Divine Attribute, but is instead inextricably involved in all its manifestations as a composite being.

A few examples from the Qur'ān should suffice to prove the essential complexity that is its nature:

وَقَالَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا لَوْلَا نُزِّلَ عَلَيْهِ الْقُرْآنُ جُمْلَةً وَاحِدَةً كَذَلِكَ لِنُثَبِّتَ بِهِ فُؤَادَكَ وَرَتَّلْنَاهُ تَرْتِيلاً

Those who are deniers say, "If only the Qur'ān were sent to him in revelation all at once!" [We do it] otherwise that We might stabilize your heart thereby, and We rehearse it [to you] at a measured pace. (Q25:32)

The Qur'ān takes time to reveal and to recite, and is not amenable to the instantaneous delivery we would expect if it were essentially one Thought.

وَقُرْآنًا فَرَقْنَاهُ لِتَقْرَأَهُ عَلَى النَّاسِ عَلَى مُكْثٍ وَنَزَّلْنَاهُ تَنْزِيلًا

And a Qur'ān that We divided so that you might read it to mankind at intervals, and We sent it down in stages. (Q17:106)



The Qur'ān is not only divisible over time but also movable; it is an object of Divine Action, rather than a part of it.

إِنَّا جَعَلْنَاهُ قُرْآنًا عَرَبِيًّا لَّعَلَّكُمْ تَعْقِلُونَ

**We have made it an Arabic Qur'ān that you may understand. (Q43:2)**

It is clear from this that the Qur'ān is made, and that its natural character involves a specific language.

وَمَا كَانَ هَذَا الْقُرْآنُ أَنْ يُفْتَرَى مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ وَلَكِنْ تَصْدِيقَ الَّذِي بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ وَتَفْصِيلَ الْكِتَابِ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهِ مِنْ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ

**It does not comport with this Qur'ān that it be forged by other than AL-LĀH, but it is confirmation of what was before it, and an exposition of the Scripture that cannot be doubted, from the Master of the worlds. (Q10:37)**

There are many references to the Qur'ān confirming previous revealed books, some of which are listed sequentially in **Q9:111: A promise, incumbent on Him in the Taurat, the Injil, and the Qur'ān**. The Qur'ān constitutes one of a series of books in temporal order, and hence is newly occurring if we mean by that something that had a starting point in time.

But once occurring, is it affected by change?

مَا نَنْسَخْ مِنْ آيَةٍ أَوْ نُنسِهَا نَأْتِ بِخَيْرٍ مِنْهَا أَوْ مِثْلَهَا أَلَمْ تَعْلَمْ أَنَّ اللَّهَ عَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ

**Whatever verse We abrogate or cause to be forgotten, We replace with what is better than it or the like of it. Do you not know that GOD has power over everything? (Q2:106)**

The answer, of course, is yes, it can be changed (as **Q16:101** also attests), but only by the One Who has revealed it. He ends this verse with the same reference to His Absolute Power that concluded His Capacity to destroy **the Messiah, son of Maryam, and his mother, and all who are on earth (Q5:17)**.

What is the guarantee, then, that the Qur'ān has not been changed since its revelation? I will address that issue shortly. It suffices now to realize that the Qur'ān is a finite revelation and not infinite in time and space as GOD's Attributes would have to be. It consists of parts, and was deliberately made to be so, unlike the impartible, eternal entity that supposedly occupies a place in GOD's Presence. Speech is an act or product

of AL-LĀH, and the Qur'ān is but one instance of the countless variety of Words He produces in other scriptures, his innumerable acts of creation, each one originated by 'Be!,' and His decrees that call an end to affairs and pass judgement on His creatures.

Finally, Absolute Unicity does not have 'contents.' (To deal with what is inherently temporal, AL-LĀH does not absorb things or emanate them as extensions of Himself, but rather creates and speaks them into being. His Immanence never becomes an identity of God and world as propounded in pantheism.) Al-Ghazzālī cannot say that AL-LĀH is composed of His Attributes; rather he believes that they somehow coexist in His Presence. How they share in His Eternity without being parts of Him or partners is never made clear. Each Attribute is single, as Al-Ghazzālī says, and thus cannot contain things that would vitiate its Singular, Eternal Nature. "If it is understood that He has a single knowledge,<sup>Ω</sup> by which He knows all existents, then understand [another] Single Attribute of the Essence, and that is Speech by which is meant all that expressions indicate." He

### ΩΩ

Why does Al-Ghazzālī refer to God's Attribute of Knowledge more often than others? The choice of this particular Attribute may not be a conscious one, but it does represent a way by which he can more easily render God intelligible to us and amenable to having Attributes 'nested' as coeternal with His Eternal Being.

This is because, unlike Attributes such as Power, Creation, and even Speech that we can readily imagine as expressions of a Unitary Being, Knowledge, Sight, and Hearing evoke images of receiving impressions from the outside. It is hard for us to imagine the contents of knowledge et cetera being other than additions to the one receiving them. Knowledge appears to be meaningless without its contents, which are necessarily multiple. Hence a Knowing God would be, according to Al-Ghazzālī, One Who acquires and, in some sense, gains by multiplicity, making Knowledge the 'model' Attribute that paves the way, as Al-Ghazzālī does, for others.

This inference is, of course, incompatible with His Absolute Unicity. How, then, does GOD 'know' things? Just as He is the Creator of all things even before they exist, so is He the Knower of all things even before they exist. Knowledge and Creation are, in fact, two phases of the same act; His knowing a particular thing in time is concomitant with His creating it in time. His Knowledge is thus a form of Power, expressed on the spot, rather than impressed in the way we believe we know things.

ΩΩ (continued)

(This principle of *verum factum*, by which knowing is coincident and identical with creation, or that truth becomes so by making it, was famously propounded by the philosopher Giambattista Vico.\*)

That is why, in describing the act of creating a thing, He says that He speaks to it (as His Pre-Existent Knowledge partially manifests itself in such speech) and then (as logically subsequent, but in fact simultaneously) it comes into being. (Q19:35)

\*Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, Volume VI, p. 156.

further states, "what is necessary for the Essence is necessary, in terms of Pre-Existence, for the Attributes."

But the Qur'ān does have contents; not only its physical expressions but even its meanings are multiple: **in it are verses of established meaning, which comprise the basis of the Book, and others which are allegorical (Q3:7)**. "Qur'ān" literally means "recitation"; how do we 'recite' some ethereal essence that has but one meaning? How can any eternal entity be free of multiplicity and partibility, on the one hand, and yet consist of an essence and accidents, on the other hand, and be 'sent down' at various times and places, with numerous references to concrete objects and events? Eternal Unicity will not allow it.



To conclude, there is no basis in either reason or revelation for the assumption that the Qur'ān is coeternal with AL-LĀH, an assumption that AL-Ghazzālī so assiduously defends to no avail. If he and other scholars had stayed within the bounds of GOD's Own Speech, they could have found enough ways to remove their opponents' doubts about the integrity and inviolability of the Qur'ān.

As I mentioned earlier, the main problem for theologians in referring to the Qur'ān as created is that "created" connotes in Arabic what it may not convey in English, namely that it is material, changeable, and hence perishable and unreliable. (That is why, out of courtesy, I do not say that the Qur'ān is created, but rather that it is His Word, that is, produced as speech.) To avoid this conclusion, theologians resorted to what I have termed the deification of the Qur'ān, resulting in it becoming an Attribute of GOD Himself.

But this idea is not found in the Qur'ān, nor was it ever mentioned in the first years of Islam. Early Muslims accepted the truth of the Qur'ān as the Word of GOD without having to assume that the Qur'ān was subsumed in or coeternal with AL-LĀH. Later theologians saw a problem they needed to solve, but for the first disciples GOD's Authority was sufficient to confirm the invulnerability of His Word, just as His appointment and defence of the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) sufficed to validate his role as Messenger, one whom all Muslims admit to be a created being.

In any case, GOD is certainly capable of giving everlasting life to whatever He has created or spoken into being at a particular time, such as human souls. We believe that Paradise, a creation of AL-LĀH, will last forever. Scripture, likewise, can be unchanging and unperishing without having to be an Attribute of GOD. A book, once written and published, can stay essentially immutable for all time. That is particularly true for one that achieved a definitive form not long after revelation, has been memorized by heart on the tongues of hundreds of millions of believers over the centuries, and is now globally extant in a digital format that could quite conceivably continue until the end of the universe. History, in other words, supports this declaration and promise:

إِنَّا نَحْنُ نَزَّلْنَا الذِّكْرَ وَإِنَّا لَهُ لَحَافِظُونَ

**We have indeed revealed the Reminder [the Qur'ān], and truly We are guarding it. (Q15:9)**

This verse makes no sense if the Qur'ān is inherently eternal and unchangeable. Why guard something that needs no guarding? And if GOD is guarding it, well, **AL-LĀH is Best as Guardian. (Q12:64)**

One might object that AL-LĀH also says, **There is no alteration in the Words of GOD. (Q10:64)**. But this is an argument for their irreplaceability once written, not for their pre-existence, since the Qur'ān itself refers to scriptures that preceded it. The very definition of pre-existence is that there is nothing before it – not even GOD Himself.

Not only is the Qur'ān guarded, but the Tablet in which it is recorded is also guarded: **It is in fact a noble Recitation / In a guarded Tablet (Q85:21–22)**. The Qur'ān is given a symbolic location on (or **in** as per Arabic usage) a surface for writing. This is significant, considering that a tablet is blank until it receives the written word, and because of the following sound *ḥadīth* from At-Tirmidhī:

إِنَّ أَوَّلَ مَا خَلَقَ اللَّهُ الْقَلَمَ فَقَالَ اكْتُبْ فَقَالَ مَا أَكْتُبُ قَالَ اكْتُبِ الْقَدَرَ مَا كَانَ  
وَمَا هُوَ كَائِنٌ إِلَى الْأَبَدِ

*Verily the first thing GOD created was the Pen. He told it, "Write." It replied, "Write what?" He said, "Write the destiny of all that is and will be till the end of time."*

*(Jāmi'ut-Tirmidhī, Vol. 4, Book 6, Ḥadīth 2155)*

This accounts for the fact that perishable things have a permanent record, even before they come into being. Yet this record exists in time, and is itself the product of a created thing, the Pen.

The Qur'ān, then, like the souls whom GOD creates, was intended to be everlasting. We do not call it eternal, however, because it does have a beginning, meaning that it is not pre-existent. There may be no holy scripture after it, but the Qur'ān itself makes it abundantly clear that there were scriptures before it. This corresponds to our common conception of what a book is – composed in time, with a production date, but written to last, theoretically forever, (i.e., with no expiry date). Once again, GOD employs language not clinically but strategically – not to encapsulate what is of Divine origin and hence essentially incomprehensible, but rather to evoke images of what we can barely imagine, such as how an Infinite Being deigns to communicate in time with mortals, using their terms and idioms. And when we come to the mention of **a guarded Tablet (Q85:22)** or **a Book** that contains GOD's knowledge of **what is in the sky and on the earth (Q22:70)**, we need only accept the image without trying to pin down its meaning, like a butterfly in a display case, to fit our narrow, ordinary concepts of what a book looks like or how it should behave.

As I pointed out earlier in this Appendix, Aristotle has a particular idea of what a 'thing' is, one which not only is of no use in referring to GOD but is also problematic for discussing objects that are basically conceptual or imaginal, such as a book of cosmic proportions. Thus his definition of the "first science" (i.e., theology) is that of "things which both exist separately and are immovable," in contrast to physics, which "deals with things which exist separately but are not immovable." (*Metaphysics*, Book VI, Chapter 1 (1026a)) Is motion, then, "immovable"? Is my idea of motion something that exists separately from motion itself? And as I learn more about it, does my idea remain immovable? Aristotle may have answers to such questions, but they are neither easy nor obvious, since his only distinction between physics and metaphysics is that of movable and immovable. No wonder that the odours of the dissection table pervade his metaphysical discussions – discussions in which much of Islamic thought about

the Qur'ān has been bogged down for over a millennium.

In contrast to this, I believe that the best way to approach this matter of things, and so to decide on how to classify the existence of the Qur'ān and much else besides, is to remember this simple rule: **There is no thing like unto Him (Q42:11)**. AL-LĀH is utterly unlike a thing, and things are utterly unlike AL-LĀH. Things are partible, temporal, and perishable (regardless of whether they actually do perish or not), and GOD is none of that.

فَمَا أُوتِيتُمْ مِنْ شَيْءٍ فَمَتَاعُ الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا وَمَا عِنْدَ اللَّهِ خَيْرٌ وَأَبْقَى  
لِلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَلَىٰ رَبِّهِمْ يَتَوَكَّلُونَ

**Anything that you are given is a comfort of this worldly life. And what is present with AL-LĀH is better and more permanent for those who have had faith and are reliant on their Lord. (Q42:36)**

So what is a thing? A thing is that for which there is no ultimate necessity. AL-LĀH is Necessarily Existing (*wājibul-wujūd*), and all His Names are necessarily existent insofar as they represent Him. If we can imagine GOD without something, then that thing is not GOD or fully representative of Him, but 'only' something. Thus GOD's Names, such as Knowing and Speaking, are not things, because GOD in His Perfection cannot be ignorant and mute. But what He knows are things insofar as they are occasional instances of His being Eternally Knowing. Insofar as He has Knowledge, He knows Himself, but even as an object of His Self-Knowledge He is not a thing. GOD-as-Object is necessary to His being GOD. But everything He knows other than Himself is only a thing, as it possesses no necessary existence. GOD can freely exist by Himself, Alone; nothing else can.

The same applies to His being a Speaker, or having a Capacity for Speech that is His eternally. But particular instances of speech, such as the Qur'ān, are not necessarily existent, especially since they contain references to things that are, likewise, not necessarily existent. It would be absurd for the Qur'ān to exist in any form if its contents did not exist, that is, if there was nothing to be recited. That is what is implied, however, when we say that the Qur'ān is uncreated, on the one hand, and on the other hand admit, as we must, that its contents or referents are created. Even when we abstract its meanings from its expressions, we still have multiplicity: **in it are verses of established meaning, which comprise the basis of the Book, and others allegorical (Q3:7)**. Absolute, Indivisible Divinity, on the other hand, has no contents; He cannot be said to 'contain' anything

but Himself. Neither does AL-LĀH absorb things or emanate them as extensions of Himself, as per the Neoplatonist conception, but rather creates and speaks them into being. **AL-LĀH is the Creator of all things. (Q39:62)**

If GOD's speech is taken to be not what He says, but what He means, and if all things are 'meant to be' (which they are), then it is not just the Qur'ān that is GOD's Speech, but the entirety of things. **His Affair is only that, when He intends [desires] a thing, He tells it "Be!" and so it is. (Q36:82).** Every thing, including the Qur'ān, is intended, (i.e., spoken by GOD as a deliberate act), which means that this entire universe is one tremendous love letter, to which the entire universe responds in kind:

وَإِنْ مِنْ شَيْءٍ إِلَّا يُسَبِّحُ بِحَمْدِهِ وَلَكِنْ لَا تَقْقَهُونَ تَسْبِيحَهُمْ

**There is not one thing but praises His Transcendence, yet you do not understand their exaltations. (Q17:44)**

The Qur'ān is the leader in this hymn, a glorious dialogue in which AL-LĀH takes on all possible pronouns – "I," "We," "Me," "Us," "You," "He," and "Him." It is from the Qur'ān that we get the strongest sense of why AL-LĀH created anything at all – so that we, as conscious, intentional beings, may participate in this grand symphony of speech from, to, in, and by Him. So overwhelmingly close to us is He in this cosmic conversation, and so intimately involved are we in this epiphany of Divinely Heartfelt Discourse, that we can finally both speak and listen to Him directly, without the mental barrier of intermediary attributes. It is as if He wants us to say, whenever we listen to the Qur'ān, not "I hear Your Speech," but rather "I hear You."



#### Addendum: Text-Based and Miscellaneous Arguments

Over one thousand years after this issue first appeared in the Muslim community, the majority of modern scholars would not hesitate to say that the matter has been settled forever, and that the proof of an uncreated Qur'ān is overwhelming. Since the time of Al-Ghazzālī the same arguments have been used again and again to defend what is now considered the orthodox position. Having dealt with those opinions conclusively, I should now turn to examine the purported textual evidence in the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth* literature. Here are a few samples of that from a contemporary website. I have summarized the arguments in italics, which are followed by my rebuttals.

أَلَا لَهُ الْخَلْقُ وَالْأَمْرُ

### 1. Truly His are the Creation and Command. (Q7:54)

*Creation and Command are different affairs. Creation, an act, only happens by Command, a Word. Command precedes Creation as in Q36:82:*

إِنَّمَا أَمْرُهُ إِذَا أَرَادَ شَيْئًا أَنْ يَقُولَ لَهُ كُنْ فَيَكُونُ

**His command is only that, when He intends [desires] a thing, He tells it “Be!” and so it is.**

*Therefore Command, a Word of GOD, is not created, and hence the Qur’ān, which is God’s Word, is not created.*

— Note that in **Q7:54** Creation is mentioned before Command. If Command preceded Creation in any sense, either temporal or logical, it would be mentioned first. By the nature of the wording, one could also infer that Creation and Command belong to Him as equally subordinate to His Own Being and pertaining to distinct spheres or phases of reality. Indeed, the implication is that both Creation and Command are verbal acts; one results in physical existence and the other in directions that govern or direct that existence.

— GOD’s Creation of Ādam (peace be upon him) is mentioned in **Q3:59**:

خَلَقَهُ مِنْ تُرَابٍ ثُمَّ قَالَ لَهُ كُنْ فَيَكُونُ

**He created him from dust, then told him, “Be!” and so he came to be.**

The order, explicit in the Arabic text, is clearly Creation first and then the Command to “Be!”

— The wording in **Q7:54** is **Truly His are the Creation (al-khalq) and Command (al-amr)**. But **Command** does not mean the Qur’ān in this instance, nor does the Qur’ān mean only **Command**, as it contains much more than commands.

— As I explained in Chapter 7, **Command** refers to a verbal expression of power or obligation. GOD’s **Command** overrules Creation or adds to it a moral element, and hence is logically subsequent. Even if we consider it prior, (i.e., superior), by virtue of its ‘higher’ status, nothing



in the Qur'ān indicates that it is eternal, removed from time.

— In **Q36:82** **amr** probably does not even mean **Command**, but ‘affair,’ ‘thing,’ or ‘matter,’ like **shai**. In **Q19:35**, for example, we read:

إِذَا قَضَىٰ أَمْرًا فَإِنَّمَا يَقُولُ لَهُ كُنْ فَيَكُونُ

**When He decrees a matter [an affair or thing], He only tells it “Be!” and so it is.**

In this verse, **a matter (amr)** cannot be ‘command,’ because He decrees it by telling it to be, making **amr** itself the thing created or commanded. The syntax and meaning are equivalent to those in **Q36:82** where it reads **when He intends [desires] a thing, He tells it “Be!” and so it is**. So **matter (amr)** in **Q19:35** is equivalent to **thing (shai)** in **Q36:82**, as both are objects of His intention or decree, and thus **His command is only that ...** could just as well be translated by **His Affair is only that ...**

— In short, **amr** does not precede Creation, but is either subsequent to it, as **Command**, or equivalent to it, as **affair, matter, or thing**. Many verses in the Qur'ān use **amr** with this latter meaning, including **Q23:53**:

فَتَقَطَّعُوا أَمْرَهُم بَيْنَهُمْ زُبُرًا

**But they divided their affair among them into sects.**

— As I discussed earlier, we say that GOD's Word is spoken, not created. But it is not eternal.

الرَّحْمَنُ  
عَلَّمَ الْقُرْآنَ  
خَلَقَ الْإِنْسَانَ

## 2. The Gracious / Taught the Qur'ān, / Created man / (Q55:1–3)

*First The Gracious (Ar-Rahmān) is mentioned alone, then the Qur'ān, which is taught, not created, followed by the creation of humanity. By this we see how the uncreated logically precedes the created. The Qur'ān is God's Knowledge, and God's Knowledge is not created.*

— In **Q9:111**, we read:

وَعَدًّا عَلَيْهِ حَقًّا فِي التَّوْرَةِ وَالْإِنْجِيلِ وَالْقُرْآنِ

**A promise, incumbent on Him in the Taurat, the Injil, and the Qur'ān.**

God taught the Qur'ān as He taught other books previous to it. The Qur'ān is, therefore, neither prior to creation nor the whole of His Knowledge, but a distinct and highly revered manifestation of His Knowledge, which includes all creation. If the Qur'ān is eternal, then so is all creation, for both are constituents of His Knowledge. We do not, however, say that the Qur'ān is created, but rather that it is taught, known, and spoken, as are other holy books. It is not the same as GOD's status as The Knower, which is inseparable from Him, but is rather an instance of it, just as the Prophet (may AL-LĀH bless him and grant him peace) was created as an instance of GOD's Mercy. (Q21:107)

وَلَوْ أَنَّمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ مِنْ شَجَرَةٍ أَقْلَامٌ وَالْبَحْرُ يَمُدُّهُ مِنْ بَعْدِهِ  
سَبْعَةُ أَبْحُرٍ مَا نَفِدَتْ كَلِمَاتُ اللَّهِ

- 3. If [all] the trees on earth were pens, and if the sea [were ink], along with seven [other] seas, the Words of GOD would not run out. (Q31:27)**

*This means that God's Words are endless, and nothing but His Attributes can be endless.*

— The universe is said to be 13.7 billion years old, and the number of atoms in the universe is thought to be about  $10^{80}$ . **The Words of GOD** certainly exceed these limits (for every subatomic particle and every relationship between them could be considered a word), but that does not make them limitless or eternal. Endlessness is not achieved by any quantity, since **Q28:88 – Everything is perishing except His Countenance.**

سَبِّحْ اسْمَ رَبِّكَ الْأَعْلَى

- 4. Glorify the Appellation of your Lord, The Highest. (Q87:1)**

*If His Names were created, it would be forbidden to glorify them. His Names are His Words, and are found in the Qur'ān. Therefore, the Qur'ān is not created.*

— Insofar as GOD is an object, He has Names. GOD-as-Object is necessary, so His Names, by which He is objectified, are also necessary. They represent Him as metonyms, like His Knowledge, Mercy, et cetera, which are not separate entities but simply various ways of referring to His Ineffable Unicity. Hence one can glorify His Names, as one can exalt His Power or seek His Pleasure.

— Their being His Words as well is irrelevant, for His Words, like His Books, have beginnings in time. I distinguish between His Names, which are indivisible non-entities coeternal with His Being, and the 'physical' words that express these Names in time. Like souls, once produced, these words are lasting, but that does not make them pre-existent or eternal as He is eternal.

— It is the Names' adherence to GOD that makes them eternal and uncreated, not their appearance in the Qur'ān, which contains many more references to created things. The argument above deliberately confuses cause and effect. The cause is their direct representation of Who GOD is. The effect of that is their manifestation in the world, through texts, holy or otherwise, and on the tongues of humans, believers or otherwise. If their appearance in the Qur'ān is what makes them uncreated, then pigs, dogs, fornication, and idolatry are also uncreated, for all of these and more are also mentioned in the Qur'ān.

قُلْ نَزَّلَهُ رُوحُ الْقُدُسِ مِنْ رَبِّكَ بِالْحَقِّ

**5. Say, "The Holy Spirit brought it [revelation] as the Truth down from your Lord." (Q16:102)**

*What comes from God must be of God. It is said that the Qur'ān is from Him, whereas this is not said of any created thing.*

— See **Q98:2**, **7:104**, and **2:101**, mentioning a messenger from God and using the same preposition, *min*. In **Q4:79**, it says **Whatever good befalls you is from GOD**. Its being from God is no proof of its being of GOD in the sense of its being uncreated, as His Essence is.

**6. In several reliable traditions, the Prophet (may God bless him and give him peace) tells his companions to seek refuge in the Perfect Words of God from danger. But no one is allowed to seek refuge in anything but God Himself. Therefore these Perfect Words of God must be His Names and Attributes, and so uncreated.**

— Yes, these *Perfect Words of GOD* are His Names, which are metonyms that use their adjunctive status to represent their referent. (Such constructions represent a literary device only, and does not prove that GOD is partible or associated with anything.) Note that they are always described in these traditions as *Perfect*, explicitly affirming their special, and presumably coeternal, status. As His Names, they are directly representative of GOD Himself, and thus not separate entities. They cannot mean the Qur’ān, which is singular, nor can they mean all its contents, because among its contents are words that mean infidel, dog, pig, et cetera. Only its Perfect Words are meant, which are, again, GOD’s Names.

— We do not say that the Face of GOD is in the Qur’ān; rather the word for “Face” is there. Nor do we say that the Hand of GOD is in the Qur’ān; rather the word for “Hand” is there. Likewise, we find in the Qur’ān the words for His Names, alongside other names and other words. His Names remain with Him, unaffected by how we misspell them or mispronounce them.

— The quoted tradition, however, does not mean that all GOD’s Words are necessarily eternal. ‘Īsā (peace be upon him), for example, is described as a **Messenger of GOD and His Own Word (Q4:171)**. Yet in **Q3:59** He says: **Verily the likeness with AL-LĀH of ‘Īsā is like that of Ādam; He created him from dust then told him “Be!” and so he came to be.**

— By conflating Name as Divine Referent with name as physical word, we are encountering a dilemma that we avoid with Face and Hand, since these latter two are ‘understood’ to be somewhere else. I believe, on the contrary, that GOD’s Face and Hand are as present to us as His Names, but we have not yet rid ourselves of physicalist thinking, and so assume that we ‘have’ His Names under our thumb, as it were, while His Face and Hand are for later and far away. In truth, they are all Divine means for emphasizing His Imminent Presence – we ‘say’ His Names, ‘see’ His Face, and ‘feel’ His Hand – and are not to be identified with the countable, limited objects of our senses.

— Furthermore, all words are temporal things insofar as they are physically manifested in speech or writing. Distinctions are made primarily in terms of their referents. At the Treaty of Ḥudaybiyah, the Messenger of GOD (may AL-LĀH bless him and grant him peace) crossed out his

own title, containing the word “AL-LĀH.” He was not cancelling GOD by crossing out a written word.

7. *In one ḥasan (good) ḥadīth— a grade lower than a ṣaḥīḥ or ‘sound’ ḥadīth – we read **The superiority of the Words of AL-LĀH over all other words is like the superiority of AL-LĀH over all of His creation.** Therefore, the Words of AL-LĀH are uncreated, as He Himself is.*

— This is not a direct statement of the eternity or uncreatedness of the Word of GOD, but as an analogy it does make its point – a rather weak point, however. The textual evidence from the Qur’ān, the Word of GOD, which I have cited in items 1 – 5 and prior to them in this article, is superior to this *ḥadīth like the superiority of AL-LĀH over all of His creation*. By comparison to the Qur’ān’s evidence, therefore, this *ḥadīth* has next to no weight at all.

— GOD’s speech is indeed superior to human speech, but both are produced. One might say, in fact, that all speech is GOD’s speech, because **He has caused everything to speak (Q41:21)**. So although He does not always speak directly, which is what we understand is the case with His occasional revelations in scripture, **AL-LĀH created you and what you do (Q37:96)**, and so can be understood as ‘speaking’ to us in all phenomena through His creative word “**Be!**” One might say that GOD’s speech is the necessary condition for ours, giving it an ontological priority that is sufficient to explain its superiority over ours.

8. *One could reason that the Words of GOD are either created or uncreated. They represent His Speech, which is His Attribute. His Attributes cannot be created – as they are coexistent with Him – and so His Words are uncreated.*

— I dealt with this earlier, in distinguishing between His Attribute of Speaking, or having the Capacity to speak, and the products of that Capacity, namely the words He has spoken from time to time, which are occasional, voluntary, and frequently referred to in the Qur’ān in terms that denote plural objects of His action, such as **A promise, incumbent on Him in the Taurat, the Injīl, and the Qur’ān (Q9:111)**.

— In **Q22:70**, a **Book** is referred to that contains GOD’s knowledge of **what is in the sky and on the earth**. If GOD’s Speech is eternal, then all the more so must His Knowledge be. And if the Qur’ān, which is

but one example of GOD's Speech, must be coeternal, then likewise **what is in the heavens and the earth** must be coeternal with GOD. And that is nonsense.

— If we equate His Words with His Capacity to speak, then logically we should equate His creatures with His Capacity to create. He is the Speaker and the Creator, and these Names are directly representative of Him. For each such Name there is a corresponding effect – for the Speaker, His Words, and for the Creator, His creatures or created beings. His Words are not the same as being the Speaker, just as His creatures are not the same as being the Creator.

— By postulating His Attributes as entities, we distract our hearts from His Supreme Unicity and lead them into dangerous territory: **Q21:19 – Woe to you for that which you ascribe [to Him]!** That is why the Prophet (may GOD bless him and give him peace) said,

يَا أَبَا بَكْرٍ لِلشِّرْكِ فِيكُمْ أَخْفَى مِنْ دَبِيبِ النَّمْلِ

*“O Abā Bakr, associationism (shirk) among you is harder to detect than the crawling of an ant.”*

*(Sunnah.com: Book 1, Ḥadīth113)*

The best conception of GOD, then, is one that strives to avoid attributes and remain content with His Names.

اللَّهُمَّ إِنِّي أَعُوذُ بِكَ أَنْ أَشْرِكَ بِكَ وَأَنَا أَعْلَمُ وَأَسْتَغْفِرُكَ لِمَا لَا أَعْلَمُ

*“O AL-LĀH, verily I seek refuge in You from knowingly associating [anything] with You, and I ask forgiveness from You for that which I know not.”*



### One Final Note

There have been times in the history of Islamic theology when discussion has been high-spirited but polite and respectful – a tradition I would like to continue. But at other times, and particularly in matters such as this one that are close to the faith, rational discourse disappears and intemperate,

hostile, and even dangerous language is used against opponents who happen to see things differently. Instead of carefully considering why someone who clearly shows that he believes in the same God and relies on the same sources could come to a well-argued but different conclusion as to what they mean, certain fiery 'scholars' brand their opponent with some ancient label such as Jahmī or Mu'tazilī, as if that were enough to consign him to Hell, and subject him to a whirlwind of abuse. These ferocious tactics include:

- straw-man arguments that misrepresent what an opponent has actually said;
- accusations of *kufr* (denial) and *shirk* (attributing partners to God), or that so-and-so has left Islam;
- threats of violence, such as saying that so-and-so may be killed, his blood is *halāl*, et cetera.

When the intellectual leaders of a community lead these attacks, the results are inevitable:

- a common and mistaken belief that faith and reason cannot coexist in religion;
- timid, unthinking followers who conclude that mental castration is the quickest route to safety, piety, and divine approval;
- a tendency to solve problems by anger, intimidation, force, and willful blindness;
- a degraded intellectual life among Muslims in general;
- lack of respect for Islamic theology and philosophy;
- a reputation for savage stupidity that only enhances the attractions of secularism and weakens the prospects of promoting faith in GOD.

Vicious diatribes offend against the teaching of the Qur'ān itself, as in Q16:125:

ادْعُ إِلَى سَبِيلِ رَبِّكَ بِالْحُكْمَةِ وَالْمَوْعِظَةِ الْحَسَنَةِ وَجَادِلْهُمْ بِالَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ هُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِمَنْ ضَلَّ عَنْ سَبِيلِهِ وَهُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِالْمُهْتَدِينَ

**Summon to your Lord's Way with sagacity and good instruction, and debate with them by what is more attractive. Verily your Lord knows best who has gone off His path. And He knows best who has been rightly guided.**

## APPENDIX II

### LEADERSHIP



We have become accustomed to thinking a leader is one who possesses authority and power. Many modern Muslims look at one who is inferior to them morally and spiritually, but happens to hold the reins of power, and are consumed with envy. ‘If only,’ they think to themselves, ‘we could command the respect and attention that this president or that king have, then all would be right with the world.’ Few things in this life are normally as irreconcilable as worldly power and spiritual purity, yet we think it our duty to combine the two in the grasp of a single individual, and so constantly encounter the contradictions that arise from such a two-headed approach. Again and again, we are defeated and humiliated, for either our spirituality holds us back from doing what we must to capture power, or our lust for power overcomes our spirituality and we are corrupted on our way to worldly heights. Either way, we can never compete, on their terms at least, with those lowly creatures who are purely for this world, and will do anything to gain and maintain their grip on power.

In the Qur’ān (4:139), GOD says, **Do they desire the power which is with them?** (“them” here meaning the infidels). **Truly all the power belongs to GOD.** The response of our modern Muslims to such verses is ‘Yes, but ...’ In other words, ‘Yes, we believe in the Word of GOD; yes, we know that all affairs are in GOD’s Hands, and that He gives dominion (*mulk*) to whomever He wills; but we are also told to struggle for the predominance of faith in the land, and to prepare all necessary means for that end. AL-LĀH is the Provider of sustenance, but surely we have to go out in search of it. The same is true with power; if we don’t struggle for it, we’ll never get it.’

My answer is simple. You say you believe, but anyone can say that. You say you know, but how do you know you know? Do you not fear the verse from the Qur’ān (29:2) which says, **Do people think that they will be left to say, “We believe,” while they have not been tested?** The answer, of course, is that they will never be left alone; they will be constantly



tested, and those who entered carelessly into contests for power without checking their faith will find themselves failing miserably.

You know as well as I do what the life of **We believe** entails. It is a ceaseless self-scrutiny, a relentless inner struggle for which there is no let-up until the very moment of death. In only the most exceptional of cases does a believer consider himself worthy of power. Does not GOD say in the Qur'ān (33:72), **Verily We offered the responsibility to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to carry it and shunned it, and man accepted it. Truly he is tyrannical and ignorant.** Now were the heavens, the earth, and the mountains not believers? Certainly they were, and still are! And so, knowing his weakness and limitations, and the heavy, heart-rending, earth-shattering sense of responsibility that accompanies real power, the human believer also avoids it. He does not desire the power that is with them, our so-called leaders of today. He remembers the instructions of Prophet Muḥammad (may AL-LĀH bless him and give him peace), who said, *Do not seek to rule, for if you are given it on your request, it will be a trust for you, but if you are given it without asking for it, you will be assisted in it; and You will covet leadership, and it will be cause for remorse on the Day of Judgement. How sweet it is to get it; how bitter it is to give it up!* And so our conscientious believer keeps his head down, restrains his ambitions, and shuns the hallways and ladders of power.

But that is not the end of our story. The beautiful thing about faith is that it flourishes in groups, and dies when left alone, untended. You have heard, of course, the *ḥadīth* which says that **The Hand of God is with the group**. The believer tries it, tastes it, and finds it to be true. Yes! If he loves his faith, and values it more than all else in this world, he will cling for dear life to his group. But what kind of group? A group of believers, naturally – people like himself. Now what do believers do to make their group cohesive, and not just a collection of individuals who happen to profess the same faith? Well, they meet one another regularly, they visit one another, they study together, they help one another, they advise one another, they uplift one another, and they strengthen one another. And they do all this *li wajhil-LĀH*, for the sake of GOD and His Good Pleasure, and they derive from this activity, this mutual concern and support, a sense of ... dare I say it? ... a sense of power. Their power? No. GOD's Power. **Truly all the power belongs to GOD.**

That is what they've always believed, but now, in a group, they get to feel it, too. The power of GOD. Now, because of it, they have the courage and the conviction to do things they should have done long ago, but could

never have done alone. They conduct study programs for their neighbours, or their neighbours' children. They establish schools. They set up a charity fund, and it becomes a *baitul-māl*. They take care of the sick, and before you know it they're running a hospital. The duties that must be done in a Muslim society are numerous and diverse; but by working as a group, these responsibilities are distributed evenly and performed joyfully, for the sheer love of seeing good deeds done.

Notice how good deeds follow naturally from faith, as a means of keeping a group together, committed, focused, and active. And so, while all these good deeds are getting done, we can imagine this group coming together and glorifying GOD for all the wondrous works that He has performed on their hands. They do not take credit for what they have accomplished, for that would lead to pride and rivalry – the downfall of their group. Rather they acknowledge, fervently and sincerely, that there is no power nor strength but with AL-LĀH. And so they thrive, and grow, and become strong in friendship and in faith.

At this point, someone is bound to object that a group does indeed need a leader, and that whenever two Muslims come together for any purpose, one of them must be appointed the *amīr*. So how does this square with all that I've said so far?

Well, let me ask then, how would you go about 'ruling' your friend? If you value his friendship, would you even use such a word as 'rule' or 'lead'? No, of course not; such titles tend to be arrogant and abrasive, while your friendship was established on a basis of equality. If you become a leader, can you no longer be friends? What we see in the world around us, of course, is precisely that; a difference in position is usually the death-knell for all ordinary friendships. But Islamic friendship is no ordinary friendship, and Islamic leadership is no ordinary leadership. Islamic friendship is multi-dimensional, not superficial; principled, not expedient; long-term, not impulsive. Islamic leadership, meanwhile, is functional, not positional; temporary, not hereditary; conditional, not absolute. You have heard that 'Absolute power corrupts absolutely,' and that is true of all creation. It is not true, of course, of GOD, the Absolute, the Incorruptible. **And GOD is the Friend of the believers. (Q3:68)** Power and friendship – both can be found in GOD, and in those whom He loves.

Perhaps, now, you will object, 'But we have a verse in the Qur'ān (4:59) which says, **O believers, obey AL-LĀH, and obey the Messenger, and those in authority among you.** And my reply is, 'Yes, but how did we arrive at **those in authority among you**? What is the basis of their authority?' The verse immediately before this one makes the conditions of

authority quite clear: **Truly GOD commands you to entrust responsibilities to those who are most worthy of assuming them, and when you decide among men that you decide with justice.**

Now responsibilities differ, and competencies differ likewise. Not all men are qualified for all things. In each situation, a different leader may be chosen according to that situation's requirements. No one man can master every task, nor should he, for that would be depriving others of their GOD-given capacity to learn and grow, to be decisive and responsible for what they, each one in his own way, can do best. To deprive a man of his GOD-given capacity for leadership in his particular field of expertise would be unjust. If there is to be one leader of all these various leaders who make up a group of believers, then he will be the one who best obeys this command to justice, and gives every leader his due.

What am I talking about – a leader of leaders? Yes, I mean it. Strange but true. Birds of a feather flock together. We have this image of different groups, each with one leader and a mass of followers, but it is wrong, misleading. True leaders attract leaders. Followers attract followers. In both groups it is hard to know who is leading whom, but for different reasons. False leaders, would-be leaders, attract followers who would be leaders if they could. Their obedience is conditional upon their leaders' giving them what they need and telling them what they want to hear. True leaders, on the other hand, exercise authority without appearing or even wanting to possess it. And so we have two main types of groups – groups of followers, in each of which one pretends to be the leader but actually dares not disobey the whims of his followers, and groups of leaders, in which claims to be 'the' leader are almost never heard.

In a group of followers, the leader follows his passions, and the others follow him and their passions as well. Which means that they too want to be leader. They, and he, regard leadership as a source of power and prestige, a thing to be desired, to be taken by force if necessary or possible. A tense, gloomy sense of insecurity permeates such groups. The leader does not trust his followers, nor they him. If he makes but one misstep, they are ready to pounce. He knows that, and so he keeps them at a distance, where they are less likely to notice his faults.

Observe the qualities of such a leader. He arrives late, and leaves early. He is rarely available to his followers, but associates frequently and for long periods with those whom he regards as his peers or superiors — for he too is a follower of false leaders further up the pyramid. Such a leader holds his followers at a distance by keeping them busy with menial tasks. They must report back to him, but briefly, and preferably in writing. He

abhors personal, face-to-face contact – so inefficient, so unpredictable, so wasteful! When he does, perforce, meet his inferiors, he dominates the conversation, imposing his view of events by sheer force of ‘character.’ Or he refers them to someone further down in the chain of his command. (If action is taken later, he can either stymie it or take credit for it.) Or he listens with a mixture of polite condescension and barely concealed annoyance; after all, he is so important, and therefore very busy. He claims to delegate responsibility to committees and subcommittees, but none of them can act meaningfully without his approval and scrutiny. He is, in short, obsessed with control – the only antidote he has to fear. He suffocates others that he might breathe a bit more easily. He plays a zero-sum game in which all Muslims are losers.

Such groups, I should add, are easily subverted, toppled, and destroyed. There are a hundred different ways to achieve that. You could play rough and kill such a leader, blackmail him, bribe him, intimidate him, or cut off a few of his perks and privileges. Or you could play a more subtle game, and start funding either a rival organization or a powerful subordinate. You could spread a false rumour and hope it turns true, or simply exert some steady, unrelenting pressure in the form of official harassment, lawsuits, or intense and critical media coverage. Not being an expert, I cannot begin to describe the permutations. The problem with such groups is that they present so many juicy targets. You have a huge, swollen head on a tiny, scrawny body; just thinking about it is enough to see it fall.

We have, on the other hand, a paradigm of leadership that is not new, yet always revolutionary, true, but never self-satisfied. The exemplar? – our Prophet Muḥammad (may AL-LĀH bless him and give him peace) with his companions, sitting in a circle in a way that would not reveal to an outsider who was leader and who was follower. They were all leaders. Do you find that to be a shocking statement? But consider what it is that a leader aims to do – he gives his all so that his companions may be like him. If he is a leader, he cannot but want that they be leaders too. And if the Messenger of AL-LĀH (may GOD bless him and give him peace) wanted something done, it was almost inevitably done. The result? – the early years of our Islamic history are bursting at the seams with leaders, many of whom, by the way, never made it onto the pages of history. But that is not what leadership is all about.

Leaders are facilitators. The Prophet (may AL-LĀH bless him and give him peace) facilitated the guidance of GOD among mankind by his teachings and example. He located the many talents buried within the characters of his companions – we call them companions, not followers – and

facilitated their growth and expression, until the world started up astonished at what his and following generations were capable of being and doing. He facilitated his companions' latent qualities of leadership by encouraging them to speak up and question him. He acknowledged his companions' expertise in matters that surpassed his knowledge, such as the matter of the date palms, the digging of a ditch around the city, and the siting of a camp before the battle of Badr. He was challenged at Ḥudaybiyah by virtually all his companions, and showed no anger at their incredulity. In all that he could share with his companions, he kept nothing back; his responsibility (*amānah*) was fulfilled in total. He enjoyed no leisure or luxury that they were denied; he was available to them as much as was humanly possible; he drained himself that they might drink from the fountain of wisdom bestowed upon him by GOD.

All this consultation and interaction, however, was not an option for the Prophet (may GOD bless him and give him peace). It was commanded by GOD. **And consult them in the matter (amr)**, says the Qur'ān (3:159). **Amr** means affair, concern, business; it also means order, command, instruction, power, authority. All these meanings are indicated here. Power and command are precisely about these things — dealing with some concern, getting some business done. There is nothing in this about position, rank, tenure, seniority, prestige, or privilege. It is a practical, decision-oriented concept, and one which a true leader is only too glad to distribute and delegate to those capable of handling responsibility. Many hands make light work.

*Amānah* means responsibility or trust, and comes from the same root as faith, *īmān*. Trust begets trust. Show faith in a person, and that person will have faith in you. AL-LĀH has given man the trust which the heavens and the earth refused because He wants man to trust Him. GOD initiated this relationship of trust, and our job is to show ourselves worthy of it. Knowing the greatness of this trust is the very essence of faith; it motivates us to do our best, and believe the best of GOD as He has believed in us. Similar relations apply to a group of leaders, or believers. They trust one another and work well together. How? By constant, face-to-face contact, good personal and communication skills, beginning with wishing one another peace. But it doesn't stop there. There is a deep inter-penetration constantly going on in the lives of a group of believers; they know and look out for one another, assisting and exhorting and emulating one another. Rarely are commands required in such relationships. A need or objective is expressed, and suddenly, almost miraculously, the men, materiel, and means are ready and able to complete the task. Contrary to the group

of followers, of falsehoods and failures, deeds are accomplished spontaneously, energetically, harmoniously, unreservedly ... divinely. No one takes credit for them, for they were done by GOD.

Such groups are difficult, perhaps impossible, to eradicate. Kill one man, and ten more of equal stature appear. Oppress them, and they go to ground, live off the land, merge with the general population, hide among the common people. And why not? They never lived otherwise. You will find nothing to take away from them but their lives; whatever else they possessed they had already given to their fellow-believers, to the poor. Try to break their ranks with lures like money, fame, or power; they turned their backs on such things long ago. They value their faith, their honour, the trust their friends have reposed in them, more than anything this world contains. You can kill the individuals in such a group, but not the group itself; it has a life and a spirit all its own. **They ask you,** says the Qur'ān (17:85) **about the Spirit. Say, "The Spirit is from the Command of my Lord. And you have been given but a little knowledge."** Just as Spirit proceeds from the Command of GOD, from GOD's leadership, we might say, so in the communities of believers is there an invincible spirit that proceeds from the practice of true leadership, the practice of giving responsibilities to their rightful owners. And the hows and whys of such a spirit are beyond our comprehension, as that verse itself declares.

What kind of characters do such blessed people have? They are honest, frugal, generous, self-critical, modest, unassuming, shy on their own behalf, bold for the truth, eager to deepen their understanding and elevate their faith, and suspicious of those who would lay claim to power without having worked for it. In general, the more commands a person gives, the less qualified he is to give them. If he were a true leader, he would find more motivating ways to get things done. But that takes work — humbling oneself before one's companions, listening more than talking, reserving judgement until the last possible moment, and preferring an hour's worth of friendship to a second's worth of leadership. It is the kind of work so many of our modern leaders refuse to do. And for that reason, you will not find such leaders having companions like the Prophet (may AL-LĀH bless him and give him peace) used to have. He, although a prophet, groomed leaders and successors. Today's leaders, although very ordinary people in all respects, are either unwilling or unable to train people to replace them.

People who would make good companions exist, but are dispersed among the population, scattered by a lack of faith in their own capacity for leadership, and a lack of knowledge of what real leadership requires. They think it means power. I'm telling you now: leadership is all about love.

## APPENDIX III

# PAYING FOR RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE AND LEADERSHIP



In writing this, I firstly beg that AL-LĀH grant me His Mercy and Guidance, that I may intend the truth and say it, and His Forgiveness, that I may be pardoned for whatever error or folly may be found in this or derived from it. I seek by this not to engage in idle disputation but ask only **O our Lord, forgive us our misdeeds and the excessiveness in our affairs, and stabilize our stance, and help us over the community of unbelievers. (Q3:147)**

The matter of wages for leaders (*a'imma*, plural of *imām*) and scholars (*'ulamā'*, plural of *'ālim*) is a difficult one, for almost as many reasons as there are arguments in support of or against it. I am not qualified to deliver a 'professional' scholarly verdict on this matter (or any other), but I believe that I am allowed to hold an opinion based on what evidence I have before me, and may defend that opinion until better evidence is presented to me. Once again, I turn to AL-LĀH for refuge from my sins and errors.

Before discussing the evidence itself, I should mention that, according to the compiler of *Mishkātul-Maṣābīḥ*, a book of *aḥādīth* arranged under section headings, of the four recognized schools of Islam three of them tend to the opinion that payment for teaching religious knowledge is permitted. Abū Ḥanīfa took the opposite view, that payment was not permitted, but I doubt that many of today's followers of the *Ḥanafī madhhab* are deterred by that from giving or taking scholars' wages in such countries as India, Türkiye, Tatarstan, and Bosnia. For many people, the ruling or view of even one school of law already puts the matter beyond question. And so if three out of four schools say that salaries for scholars are acceptable, then the issue is decided and concluded.

We cannot ignore or dismiss the verdicts of an apparent majority of scholars, except to wonder about what is known in modern parlance as a 'conflict of interest' – like a judge passing judgement on his own fitness

for office. Still, we will take this preponderance of opinion at face value, and agree that those who hold that a scholar can receive wages for his teaching are entitled by law to believe so. It is a valid Islamic opinion, and no one can be blamed or excluded from the community of believers for maintaining it.

On the other hand, one can say the same for the opinion of Abī Ḥanīfa, that it too is valid, and defensible, and Islamic to believe that pay for imparting religious knowledge is wrong. I intend to show that, based on what I know to date, this is by far the stronger opinion, and inherently more worthy of acceptance. I do not expect to change anyone's mind by this, but rather to **stabilize the stance** of those who, in this age, are very likely isolated, unsupported, and bewildered by what has become the common belief and 'standard practice' in the Muslim world.

### **Evidence from the Qur'ān**

There are at least fifteen different, direct references to this specific issue in the Qur'ān. They are: (6:90), (10:72), (11:29, 51), (12:104), (25:57), (26:109, 127, 145, 164, 180), (34:47), (36:21), (38:86), and (42:23). Mūsā (peace be upon him) also suggests taking a wage for rebuilding a wall to his mentor (Khidr) in (Q18:77), and that one comment causes an abrupt end in Mūsā's journey of understanding. For this last verse, though, the 'point' or 'moral' is somewhat debatable, so we will forego a discussion of it, however suggestive it might be that even mentioning compensation brings learning to a halt.

Five prophets – namely Nūḥ, Hūd, Ṣāliḥ, Lūṭ, and Shu'aib (peace be upon them all) – before Muḥammad (may GOD bless him and give him peace) are described as saying that they did not seek any **recompense for it**, i.e., for conveyance of the message revealed to them from God. The word **recompense** or **wage** is used in all eight cases (with Nūḥ mentioned in three places and Hūd twice) to mean monetary or material gain, except for (Q11:29), where Nūḥ says: **O my people, I am not asking wealth for it. My recompense is only with AL-LĀH**. In all other cases, **recompense** is used for referring both to what is not demanded from the people, namely money, and what AL-LĀH will give instead, i.e., a heavenly reward.

The implications are clear. The prophetic message is not exchangeable with any worldly currency, leaving the prophet free of suspicion regarding his motives and the people free of any burden but the most important one,



that is, the responsibility to recognize and follow truth. The Prophet is independent of the people he is calling and warning, and answerable to GOD alone. And if scholars are the “heirs of the prophets,” according to one *ḥadīth*, they will be of all people the most eager to observe, honour, repeat, and implement these criteria, which could well be considered among the fundamental prerequisites for even having the job to start with.

In addition to these examples, which by their repetition lend extra force to the importance of this principle, there is the admonition of an unnamed pious man **from the outskirts of the city** in the time of Mūsā (peace be upon him) who directly tells the people, **Follow those who do not ask for recompense and are themselves well-guided. (Q36:21)** Here the linkage is made between what prophets never say or do (i.e., ask for material rewards), and what believers should be looking for in leaders (i.e., precisely this characteristic of prophets, which is a quality associated with good guidance). The people are not told to follow only prophets, but rather those, including prophets, who have these particular attributes.

Muḥammad himself (may GOD bless him and give him peace) is ordered to say the same thing in five separate verses, and is described as saying so in one more. As the heir and seal of the prophets, he combines and encapsulates all the noble and necessary qualities of those who preceded him in this work. He is told of them as examples to follow, particularly in **(Q6:90): Those are the ones whom GOD has guided, therefore emulate their guidance. Say, “I do not ask for any recompense from you. It is but a reminder for the worlds.”**

I consider this emphasis and repetition to be argument enough for one who fears AL-LĀH and takes heed of what He says before all other words, and what He prescribes before all other books. The message is fifteen times as clear as day, and there is virtually nothing in the Qur’ān to counteract or offset it. Rather the context of other verses only corroborates and solidifies this prominent, powerful, unpopular standpoint. There are dozens of ways to show how the overall message of the Qur’ān strengthens and clarifies this principle, but I will mention, briefly, only three.

### **Fearfulness**

Having witnessed just this much evidence, a Muslim of sound heart and mind would rightly say, ‘This is enough for me. Whatever other arguments there may be, I cannot simply walk right past these verses and pretend they do not matter. I fear being called to account for knowing even this much.’

He would recall **Q35:28: Truly it is but the knowing ones among His slaves who fear AL-LĀH**. This fearfulness, also known as *taqwā* or *khashya*, is, in fact, the pre-eminent quality of real scholars, so of all people they should be the least inclined to ‘try out’ something that the prophets religiously avoided and Muḥammad (may GOD bless him and give him peace) was also ordered to proclaim as forbidden to him. Fearfulness is further mentioned, in many verses, as what should prevent believers from ‘selling’ their religion: **(Q5:44) So do not fear the people, rather be in fear of Me, and do not sell My signs for paltry sums**. In this context, **signs** clearly refer to the verses or contents of His scriptures. Furthermore, as we read in **Q17:107, Say, “Believe in it, or else believe it not. Truly those who were endowed with knowledge from before, when it was read to them, would fall upon their faces in prostration.”** Clearly, then, someone who can say, ‘The possibility of being wrong does not worry me, and these verses don’t apply to my case. I’ll take my chances, along with my salary,’ has done something with his fear of AL-LĀH that has also buried the kind of knowledge referred to in these verses. Does any other kind deserve the name of knowledge?

### Giving Up the World

Denigration of the world (*dhammud-dunyā*) is another very conspicuous teaching of the Qur’ān. The world is frequently mentioned as something that diverts the believer from his/her path to AL-LĀH, and must be overcome, set aside, or at least given lower priority. **(Q9:24) Say, “If your parents and your children and your brethren and your spouses and your family and your wealth that you have gathered and the trade in which you fear a loss and the dwellings you enjoy are dearer to you than AL-LĀH, His Messenger, and striving in His path, then wait until AL-LĀH arrives with His command. And GOD does not give guidance to the people who are dissolute.”** It appears that an exchange must be made, and that one has to decide whether one will live with less, but for AL-LĀH, or with more, and with the illusion of doing just as well as those who made a sacrifice. **(Q4:74) So let those fight upon the path of God who sell the life of this world for the Everafter.** And **(Q9:111) Verily AL-LĀH has bought from the believers their own selves and their possessions so that verily the Garden is for them.** Only one who has lived ‘inside’ the spirit of these verses and realized them in his/her own life can

be qualified to teach them. Otherwise, the teacher falls under this pronouncement: **(Q61:2-3) O you who have believed, why do you say what you do not perform? / Terribly offensive is it with AL-LĀH to say what you do not perform.**

### **Former Scholars**

There are several places in the Qur’ān where the scholars of the People of the Book are mentioned in relation to money. One of the most salient for this discussion is **Q9:34: O you who have believed, verily a large part of the priests and monks consume the people’s wealth deceitfully and turn them from the path of GOD.** Notice how the believers are addressed first. Why should it concern us what clerics of ages past used to do? How could it possibly be relevant to us as Muslims, who supposedly have no clergy, no class of people who take money or a salary in exchange for giving us ‘religion’?

In his *tafsīr*, Ibnu Kathīr explains, based on his sources – I am paraphrasing here, rather than translating word for word – that the **priests** are the scholars of the Jews and the **monks** are the ‘professional’ recluses of the Christians. The purpose of the verse is to warn us against corrupt scholars and misguided worshippers among us (i.e., Muslims). In a sound *ḥadīth*, quoted by Ibnu Kathīr, the Prophet (may GOD bless him and give him peace) said, *“You will perpetrate the ways of those before you, in perfect lockstep [literally “feather for feather”].” They asked, “The Jews and Christians?” He said, “Who else?”* They made a living out of their religion and from their positions and leadership among people, and thus obtained the people’s wealth. The Jewish rabbis in particular received taxes, gifts, and fees. Therefore, it was only natural that they should oppose the message of AL-LĀH that undermined these privileges and circulate lies among their followers in order to extinguish it.

### **Evidence from Ahādīth**

The argument for allowing payment in exchange for transmitting the words of AL-LĀH to people seems to be confirmed by the following *ḥadīth*:

عَنْ أَبِي سَعِيدٍ رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُ قَالَ انْطَلَقَ نَفَرٌ مِنْ أَصْحَابِ النَّبِيِّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ فِي سَفَرَةٍ سَافَرُوا حَتَّى نَزَلُوا عَلَى حَيٍّ مِنْ أَحْيَاءِ الْعَرَبِ فَاسْتَضَافُوهُمْ، فَأَبَوْا أَنْ يُضَيِّفُوهُمْ فَلَدَغَ سَيِّدُ ذَلِكَ الْحَيِّ فَسَعَوْا لَهُ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ لَا يَنْفَعُهُ شَيْءٌ فَقَالَ بَعْضُهُمْ لَوْ أَتَيْنَاهُمْ هُوَ لَا الرَّهْطَ الَّذِينَ نَزَلُوا لَعَلَّهُ أَنْ يَكُونَ عِنْدَ بَعْضِهِمْ شَيْءٌ فَأَتَوْهُمْ فَقَالُوا يَا أَيُّهَا الرَّهْطُ إِنَّ سَيِّدَنَا لُدَغَ وَسَعَيْنَا لَهُ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ لَا يَنْفَعُهُ فَهَلْ عِنْدَ أَحَدٍ مِنْكُمْ مِنْ شَيْءٍ فَقَالَ بَعْضُهُمْ نَعَمْ وَاللَّهِ إِنِّي لَأَرْقِي وَلَكِنْ وَاللَّهِ لَقَدْ اسْتَضَفْنَاكُمْ فَلَمْ تُضَيِّفُونَا فَمَا أَنَا بِرَاقٍ لَكُمْ حَتَّى تَجْعَلُوا لَنَا جُعَلًا فَصَالَحُوهُمْ عَلَى قَطِيعٍ مِنَ الْغَنَمِ فَانْطَلَقَ يَتَقَلُّ عَلَيْهِ وَيَقْرَأُ { الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ } فَكَانَ مَا نَشِطُ مِنْ عِقَالٍ فَانْطَلَقَ يَمْشِي وَمَا بِهِ قَلْبَةٌ قَالَ فَأَوْفَوْهُمْ جُعَلَهُمُ الَّذِي صَالَحُوهُمْ عَلَيْهِ فَقَالَ بَعْضُهُمْ اأَفْسِمُوا فَقَالَ الَّذِي رَقِيَ لَا تَفْعَلُوا حَتَّى نَأْتِيَ النَّبِيَّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ فَتَذْكُرَ لَهُ الَّذِي كَانَ فَتَنْظُرَ مَا يَأْمُرُنَا فَقَدِمُوا عَلَى رَسُولِ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ فَذَكَّرُوا لَهُ فَقَالَ وَمَا يُدْرِيكَ أَنَّهَا رُفِيَةٌ ثُمَّ قَالَ قَدْ أَصَبْتُمْ أَفْسِمُوا وَاضْرِبُوا لِي مَعَكُمْ سَهْمًا فَضَحِكَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ

*From Abū Saʿīd (may AL-LĀH be pleased with him) who said: "Some of the companions of the Prophet (may AL-LĀH bless him and give him peace) went on a journey till they reached one of the Arab tribes at night. They asked the latter to treat them as their guests but they refused. The chief of that tribe was then bitten by a snake (or stung by a scorpion) and they tried their best to cure him but in vain. Some of them said (to the others), 'Nothing has benefited him, so go to the people who resided here at night; it may be that some of them might possess something (as treatment).' They went to the group of the companions and said, 'Our chief has been bitten by a snake (or stung by a scorpion) and we have tried everything but he has not benefited. Have you got anything (useful)?' One of them replied, 'Yes, by AL-LĀH! I can recite a charm, but as you have refused to accept us as your guests, I will not recite the charm for you unless you fix for us some wages for it.' They agreed to pay them a flock of goats. One of them then spit on him and recited 'All praise is for the Lord of the Worlds' over the chief who became all right as if he was released from a chain, and got up and started walking, showing no signs of sickness. They paid them what they agreed to pay. Some of them (i.e., the companions) then suggested division of their earnings among themselves, but the one who performed the recitation said, 'Do*

*not divide them till we go to the Prophet (may AL-LĀH bless him and give him peace) and narrate the whole story to him, and wait for his order.’ So, they went to AL-LĀH’s Apostle (may AL-LĀH bless him and give him peace) and narrated the story. AL-LĀH’s Apostle asked, ‘How did you come to know that it was recited as a charm?’ Then he added, ‘You have done the right thing. Divide (what you have earned) and assign a share for me as well.’ The Prophet (may AL-LĀH bless him and give him peace) smiled thereupon.”*

*(Ṣaḥīḥul-Bukhārī, Book 37, Ḥadīth 2276)*

So here we have it. A man recites the Qur’ān only after demanding payment, and receives it. The matter is reported to the Prophet (may GOD bless him and give him peace), who not only approves of the deal but smiles and asks for a share. What could be more clear?

If we consider the text more closely, however, we see that this *ḥadīth* is of doubtful relevance to the matter of paying scholars for teaching religion.

- 1) It is highly unlikely that the Arab tribe in question was Muslim. They were inhospitable to a group of travelling Muslims – unthinkable behaviour among Muslims at a time when they were a small, united, enthusiastic band of believers surrounded by unbelief and hostility – and apparently had no knowledge of Al-Fātiḥah, the prime component of the Qur’ān. It is much more probable that the relationship between the two groups was a tense one, and that in other circumstances they would have been at war. Hence the refusal of hospitality, and also the demand for payment, which was explicitly stated to be compensation for that refusal.
- 2) The other companions in the travelling party suggested division of the reward, which is what would normally have been done when Muslims were on a campaign, dividing the spoils of war. If it had been a typical ‘religious knowledge for wages’ situation, surely only the teacher would merit payment. The Prophet (may AL-LĀH bless him and give him peace) adopted the same position, and asked for his share of the ‘booty.’ **(Q8:41) Know that what you gain as spoils of war, one fifth of it is for AL-LĀH, and for the Messenger ...**
- 3) Nothing was taught. *Al-Fātiḥah* was recited as a charm. It is more accurate to say that the payment was made for practising medicine.

Of the four elements in a typical ‘religious knowledge for wages’ scenario, these are missing:

- the teacher (The companions were in ‘campaign mode.’)
- the knowledge (Nothing was taught.)
- the student (The recipient was probably not Muslim, and no learning is mentioned.)
- the payment (The Arab chief ‘paid’ for a medical transaction, but his ‘payment’ was treated like booty by the Muslims.)

A similar *ḥadīth*, probably concerning the same incident, ends with the Prophet (may AL-LĀH bless him and give him peace) saying, ***Verily the most appropriate of what you take as wages is for the Book of GOD.*** But this follows directly after a version of the *ḥadīth* narrated above, under the same subject heading (in Al-Bukhārī’s book) of doing *ruqya*, namely reciting the Qur’ān as a charm to cure illness. Therefore, although ***for the Book of GOD*** is worded in general terms, it can only be understood as applying to the specific nature of *ruqya*, since otherwise it would be in direct contradiction to all of those 15 verses from the Qur’ān I mentioned earlier. In any such apparent conflict of meaning, the authority of the Qur’ān is paramount.

Yet another *ḥadīth* seems to justify equating knowledge of the Qur’ān with money. It relates how a woman was married by the Prophet (may GOD bless him and give him peace) to a man who was told to look at home for what he could offer as a dowry.

ذَهَبَ فَطَلَبَ ثُمَّ جَاءَ فَقَالَ مَا وَجَدْتُ شَيْئًا وَلَا خَاتَمًا مِنْ حَدِيدٍ فَقَالَ  
هَلْ مَعَكَ مِنَ الْقُرْآنِ شَيْءٌ قَالَ مَعِيَ سُورَةُ كَذَا وَسُورَةُ كَذَا قَالَ  
اذْهَبْ فَقَدْ أَنْكَحْتُكَهَا بِمَا مَعَكَ مِنَ الْقُرْآنِ

*He went and looked, then came and said, “I did not find anything, even an iron ring.” Then [the Prophet] replied, “Do you have anything of the Qur’ān?” He replied, “I have this and that sūrah.” He [the Prophet] said, “Go, for I have married you to her for what you have of the Qur’ān.”*

(*Ṣaḥīḥul-Bukhārī, Book 67, Ḥadīth 5149*)

This was an exceptional case, granted to a man who was obviously in extreme poverty. If we were to take it at face value, it would mean that knowledge of the Qur’ān is worth less than an iron ring – a conclusion that would be considered blasphemous by those same scholars who seek to be

paid for their services. If taken out of context, moreover, one could claim that knowledge of the Qur'ān was legal tender, and use it to purchase goods in the market. I doubt that any serious intellectual could claim to build a case for the great institutions of paid Islamic learning on such a flimsy foundation, one that was improvised for a clearly marginal situation and not in any way intended to counteract fifteen solid verses of the Qur'ān or the next *ḥadīth*, which is surprisingly emphatic.

عَنِ الْأَسْوَدِ بْنِ ثَعْلَبَةَ عَنْ عُبَادَةَ بْنِ الصَّامِتِ قَالَ عَلَّمْتُ نَاسًا مِنْ أَهْلِ الصُّفَّةِ الْكِتَابَ وَالْقُرْآنَ فَأَهْدَى إِلَيَّ رَجُلٌ مِنْهُمْ قَوْسًا فَقُلْتُ لَيْسَتْ بِمَالٍ وَأَرْمِي عَنْهَا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ عَزَّ وَجَلَّ لَا تَيِّنَ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ فَلَأَسْأَلَنَّهُ فَأَتَيْتُهُ فَقُلْتُ يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ رَجُلٌ أَهْدَى إِلَيَّ قَوْسًا مِمَّنْ كُنْتُ أُعَلِّمُهُ الْكِتَابَ وَالْقُرْآنَ وَلَيْسَتْ بِمَالٍ وَأَرْمِي عَنْهَا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ قَالَ إِنْ كُنْتَ تُحِبُّ أَنْ تُطَوَّقَ طَوْقًا مِنْ نَارٍ فَاقْبَلْهَا  
*From Ubadatah niş-Şāmit (may AL-LĀH be pleased with him) who said: "I taught some persons of the people of Şuffah writing and the Qur'ān. A man of them presented to me a bow. I said: 'It cannot be reckoned property; I shall shoot with it in AL-LĀH's path. I will visit the Apostle of AL-LĀH (may AL-LĀH bless him and give him peace) and ask him (about it).' So I came to him and said: 'Apostle of AL-LĀH, one of those whom I have been teaching writing and the Qur'ān has presented me a bow, and it cannot be reckoned property; I shall shoot with it in AL-LĀH's path.' He said: 'If you like to be garlanded with a necklace of fire, then accept it.'"*

(Sunanu Abī Dāwūd, Book 24, *Ḥadīth* 3416)

Here we may note:

- 1) Ubada taught the Qur'ān and another subject, writing. The punishment awaiting the man for accepting payment remained severe, even though arguably half of his teaching might not be considered religious at all.
- 2) Ubada proposed to use the gift in the path of AL-LĀH, not for himself. That 'solution' was not accorded any extra merit.
- 3) Ubada did not demand payment; rather a gift was made to him after the fact. Still, it made no difference.
- 4) When we compare the above account with the first *ḥadīth* from Al-Bukhārī, there is a huge disproportion between the work done, on the one hand, and the payment, on the other. In the first case, a companion had only to recite seven verses to one man, without teaching them, and

received enough goats that his whole group and the Prophet himself could demand shares in them. In the second case, a companion taught a group of people the Qur’ān and writing, no doubt involving multiple lessons and considerable time and effort, and got one bow from one of his students in return, while not demanding anything. And yet the first story ended with congratulations, approval, and a gain in wealth, while the second story ended with an ominous *necklace of fire* looming over the narrative. Why is that? And which of the two stories more nearly describes the services offered by today’s religious scholars?

I need not discuss the relative soundness of the two narrations. But even if we were to give ten times the weight to the first *ḥadīth* compared to the second, and throw in a favourable *fatwā* or two for free, I would feel much, much safer ignoring the first and attending closely to the lessons in the second.

Numerous other *aḥādīth* reinforce the conclusion that what we do for our faith, on the one hand, and for material gain, on the other hand, should be kept as far apart as possible.

عَنْ عُثْمَانَ بْنِ أَبِي الْعَاصِ قَالَ إِنَّ مِنْ آخِرِ مَا عَاهَدَ إِلَيَّ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ أَنْ اتَّخِذَ مُوَدَّنًا لَا يَأْخُذُ عَلَى أَذَانِهِ أَجْرًا

*From ‘Uthmānib-nil-‘Ās, who said, “Among the last of what the Messenger of GOD (may AL-LĀH bless him and give him peace) had me agree to was that I would not appoint a mu’adhdhin who would take a wage for his adhān.”*

*(Jāmi’ut-Tirmidhī, Book 2, Ḥadīth 209)*

عَنْ عُمَرَ بْنِ حُصَيْنٍ أَنَّهُ مَرَّ عَلَى قَارِئٍ يَقْرَأُ ثُمَّ سَأَلَ فَاسْتَرْجَعَ ثُمَّ قَالَ سَمِعْتُ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ يَقُولُ مَنْ قَرَأَ الْقُرْآنَ فَلَيْسَ مِنَ اللَّهِ بِهِ فَإِنَّهُ سَيَجِيءُ أَقْوَامٌ يَقْرءُونَ الْقُرْآنَ يَسْأَلُونَ بِهِ النَّاسَ

*From ‘Imrānib-ni Ḥuṣayn, who passed someone who was reciting, then [started] begging. He exclaimed, “Truly we belong to GOD and unto Him do we return.” He said, “I heard the Messenger of GOD (may GOD bless him and give him peace) say, ‘Whoever recites the Qur’ān, let him seek [his reward from] AL-LĀH by it. Verily there will be those who read the Qur’ān and then go begging to the people.’”*

*(Jāmi’ut-Tirmidhī, Book 45, Ḥadīth 2917)*



عَنْ أَبِي هُرَيْرَةَ قَالَ قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ مَنْ تَعَلَّمَ  
عِلْمًا مِمَّا يُبْتَغَى بِهِ وَجْهُ اللَّهِ عَزَّ وَجَلَّ لَا يَتَعَلَّمُهُ إِلَّا لِيُصِيبَ بِهِ  
عَرَضًا مِنَ الدُّنْيَا لَمْ يَجِدْ عَرْفَ الْجَنَّةِ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ يَعْنِي رِيحَهَا

*Narrated Abū Hurairah: The Prophet (may GOD bless him and give him peace) said: "If anyone studies knowledge that is sought for the sake of GOD the Mighty and Glorious, but only to get worldly advantage, he will not find the odour of Paradise on the Day of Resurrection."*

*(Sunanu Abī Dāwūd, Book 26, Ḥadīth 3664)*

عَنْ أَبِي الْبَخْتَرِيِّ قَالَ أَخْبَرَنِي مَنْ سَمِعَ النَّبِيَّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ  
يَقُولُ وَقَالَ سُلَيْمَانُ حَدَّثَنِي رَجُلٌ مِنْ أَصْحَابِ النَّبِيِّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ  
وَسَلَّمَ أَنَّ النَّبِيَّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ قَالَ لَنْ يَهْلِكَ النَّاسُ حَتَّى  
يُعْذِرُوا أَوْ يُعْذِرُوا مِنْ أَنْفُسِهِمْ

*A man from among the companions of the Prophet (may AL-LĀH bless him and give him peace) reported him as saying: "The people will not be destroyed until they make excuses for themselves."*

*(Sunanu Abī Dāwūd, Book 39, Ḥadīth 4347)*

### Comments by Early Scholars

Abū Hāzim (may AL-LĀH have mercy on him) used to say, "The scholars of our time are content with speech but not practice. The first generations used to practise but not speak. After them the people practised and spoke, and were followed by a people who spoke but did not practise. There will come a time when people will neither speak nor practise."

‘Abdur-Raḥīm as-Sulamī (may AL-LĀH have mercy on him) said, "We met people who learned ten verses of the Qur’ān, followed by another ten. They would not move to another ten without practising the first ten."

It was said to Ash-Sha’bī (may AL-LĀH have mercy on him) "Deliver your verdict to us, O Scholar!" He replied to them, "Do not say scholar to the likes of me, but the scholar is the one who humbles his joints from the submissive fear of AL-LĀH."

Imām Mālik said: "Knowledge is not identical with intelligence or one’s grasp of religious sayings, but rather knowledge is a light sent down into

the hearts of men. Knowledge is useful insofar as it brings men closer to AL-LĀH and farther from pride.”

### **Evidence from Reasoned Arguments**

Surprisingly for a matter on which religious scholars need to rely quite heavily if they are to continue taking salaries and sleeping soundly at night, most of the arguments advanced on their behalf are not really religious arguments at all. They are what I would characterize as ‘rationalizations after the fact;’ in other words, ‘Here we are, and this is how it’s been done, and we find it convenient, so ... we’ll keep on doing it. We’re all scholars, and you aren’t, so sit down and shut up.’

In this matter, like many other dubious matters such as participation in *kāfir* politics, ‘Islamic’ banking, and female leadership, the concept of necessity is taken as a crutch or pair of crutches, so much so that in time our proper means of mental movement, namely the Qur’ān and Sunnah, are left dangling from our intellectual body as the useless appendages we have let them become.

The main justification for paying scholars and leaders, such as an *imām* in a *masjid*, according to the modern argument, is that these people need to make a living, that is, have food, housing, and the wherewithal to support a family, and we need these people to work full-time to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves (i.e., study the religion and teach it). An extension of this argument is that since these people need to be qualified to teach, and such qualification involves years of study in schools (also requiring fees), their investment in this selfless and holy endeavour needs to be compensated. And since we compensate other professionals for their work, we need to pay a fair wage to these professionals as well. And since teaching and learning are religious duties, then whatever facilitates the performance of those duties, such as dollars for scholars, is likewise a duty.

In response, besides the evidence provided above, which should be sufficient to satisfy anyone inclined to obey AL-LĀH and His Messenger, I offer here a number of points, some of which could be easily applied to the issue of paid clergy in general, regardless of faith.

- 1) The original idea of ‘necessity’ in Islam is derived from certain well-known cases in actual life during the time of the Prophet (may GOD bless him and give him peace), such as that of ‘Ammārib-ni Yāsir, who saw his parents tortured to death and who verbally renounced his faith (temporarily, of course) under the threat of suffering the same

fate. The Prophet (may AL-LĀH bless him and give him peace) approved of his choice, which is referred to in **Q16:106**. Another example, repeatedly mentioned in the Qur’ān, is that of eating forbidden meat, such as pork, **when you are so compelled, (Q6:119)** that is, by extreme hunger, **not from desire or in excess. (Q2:173)**. If, for example, one piece of pork is sufficient to keep you alive until better food can be found, then two pieces would be forbidden. The scholars have since loosened the grounds of necessity to include unreasonable inconvenience, such as paying taxes to a non-Muslim state rather than emigrating to another land where, presumably, another set of obstacles would be faced (e.g., corruption and bribery in Muslim countries). But please note that all such ‘necessities’ are imposed on us by our environment, and are relatively inescapable. We cannot say, “I need to go outside without my *hijāb* because I don’t like staying indoors all the time, and people look at me differently when I wear it.” Or “I need to vote in the next election because otherwise our voices would not be heard (as if one needs to be heard to breathe properly, or as if Muslims never lived, thrived, worshipped, and died in kingdoms or empires where their voices counted for nothing). Or “I need to beat you methodically to a bloody pulp, because otherwise I would have to release my pent-up anger by killing you.” This kind of necessity posits some relative loss or discomfort or self-restraint as a justification for doing what one wants. ‘Dollars for scholars’ is of this type. The reality is that in all ages of Islam, and particularly among the early generations, much of the greatest work in spreading and teaching Islam was done by unpaid volunteers, many of whom disdainfully and rightly refused any remuneration. Among them, of course, lived a galaxy of the greatest scholars and leaders of our faith. Nor are such people any fewer nowadays. Their presence and numbers are hidden by the predominance of our paid ‘experts,’ who must bulk up their expertise to justify their pay. But Islamic history is a clear refutation of their ‘necessity’ or our need for them. Rather the need we feel is in ourselves, a product of our weakness, worldliness, and lack of imagination.

- 2) If there is any doubt that extensive, meaningful, and useful knowledge can be provided at no cost by eager, well-informed volunteers, we have only to look at the host of unpaid bloggers and podcasters who produce constant and copious amounts of excellent material or contribute anonymously to the massive success of publicly accessible projects such as Wikipedia (no longer as free from political and economic interference, sadly, as it once was).

- 3) The association of money with scholars leads people to assume that if one is not being paid, one has no knowledge. The evidence from the Qur'ān and *aḥādīth* cited earlier indicates that the reverse is more likely to be true.
- 4) On the other hand, ironically, we tend to respect scholars less when we know that they are getting money for what they do. And respect for scholars is an essential element in learning from them. As for those whose devotion to scholars is higher the more they are paid, such respect is in fact for the money that gives them their 'class,' just as we admire millionaires but idolize billionaires.
- 5) The commercialization of religious instruction, along with the frenzy of non-stop self-promotion and entertainment accompanying its entry into social media, has produced a decadent celebrity culture that demands ever larger amounts of cash to maintain its growth. Ordinary Muslim 'consumers' of this culture are dazzled and fooled by it, and the stars and celebrities who feed off it are forced to compete for clicks and eyeballs to maintain their precarious status in it, while the humble, honest scholars who refrain from contending in this carnival are regarded as nobodies. A vicious circle of 'consumer' demand for 'big names' and skyrocketing fees to justify such attention has become increasingly cut off from the reality of poor Muslims who, in their millions, have no time for or interest in this tremendous travesty.
- 6) The money paid to scholars is diverted from projects of greater importance that are actually encouraged and/or mandated in the Qur'ān, such as feeding the poor and paying off debts.
- 7) A paid scholar is also less likely to have time and sympathy for the poor and needy. After all, they are a drain on scarce resources that might have gone to him, and cut into the pet prestige projects of the richly pious.
- 8) 'Dollars for scholars' promotes a crass, materialistic view of how religion works. When problems are solved by throwing money at them or hiring people to deal with them, people's capacity for more spiritual and sensitive solutions becomes marginalized and atrophied.
- 9) The justice and egalitarianism for which Islam should be famous (and is no more, it seems) is imperilled by paid scholars' dependence on

the richest persons or institutions in the community. The supposedly best scholars gravitate to the higher-paying neighbourhoods, which in turn demand work performance, such as favourable *fatāwā*, entertaining ‘Islamic’ activities, symbolic but empty demonstrations such as protest marches, and attitudes that flatter the influential members of the community, all of which justify the higher pay. A ‘professional’ scholar of this type cultivates an image and persona of being among the elite, but always manages to stoop a bit in the company of his paymasters and controllers.

- 10) Paid scholars are always easier to control, both by the richest members of the congregation and by the other gatekeepers, particularly agents of the government, through surveillance, licensing, and certification. Unpaid scholars need not worry about any of that, and are free to act and speak according to their consciences. Unpaid scholars who act on what they know are more likely to be at the forefront of *jihād*, courageous in defence of truth and justice, and aware of the real problems of the ordinary working Muslim. Paid scholars will tend to be bewildered by the free play of thought around them (for they are not paid to participate in it), conservative and status-conscious, keenly aware of who has the power, and suspicious of opinions that do not come out of board meetings or official documents. The logic of their situation as employees tied to an institution will lead them to support the authorities against the ‘radicals,’ who not only criticize them for their inaction and sycophancy but might also upset their privileges and comforts. The modern secular state’s use of ‘terror’ as an instrument of manipulation fits well with the paid scholars’ paranoia of being blamed for what unauthorized individuals are doing and saying about Islam, and thereby losing their perquisites and privileges.
- 11) Because professional Muslim teachers, academics, and *imāms* all have their personal financial interests to protect, the official positions of their councils and associations no longer reflect the established consensus of independent scholars from earlier times but rather the ‘new realities’ where usury is accepted, government appointments are coveted, corrupt alliances are formed, and not rocking the boat is the norm. Non-members who question the legal decisions and statements of these somnolent comfort zones are either harshly condemned or studiously ignored, as such questions threaten the steady income of the in-group and the cozy relationships these guilds have developed with the worlds of business and politics.

- 12) One who considers himself a ‘cleric’ has put himself in grave danger of setting himself over the lives of his ‘lay’ brothers, and losing fearfulness and humility along with the pith and purpose of his knowledge. May AL-LĀH preserve us from such a scholarship.
- 13) Qualifications and salaries go together in the world of business; but is our religion a business? Are not all of us full-time Muslims? And are not our wages with AL-LĀH? Being an ‘*ālim*’ is not just another job; it is a way of life, not a way to make a living. This knowledge is a public resource, like our libraries, not a private position – a gift from GOD, not a tradable commodity.

More could be said on this, but AL-LĀH is Sufficient for our needs, and the Best of teachers. May our approach to Him show us more of His Truth, and may that make us forever grateful.

## APPENDIX IV

# O YOU ENWRAPPED (*SŪRAH 73*)



### In the Name of God, The Gracious, The Compassionate

GOD commences by naming Himself as AL-LĀH (The GOD), Ar-Raḥmān (The Gracious), and Ar-Raḥīm (The Compassionate). By this introduction we know Who is calling us, and what are His leading Attributes. This is the Voice of Authority and Love.

#### 1. O you enwrapped in garments!

We are, through the person of the Messenger (may GOD bless him and grant him peace), identified as wrapped up in our clothing, in accoutrements that offer protection, warmth, adornment, and opportunities to hide. We tend to think that GOD is hiding from us, but He has no need to hide. Rather it is man who cannot bear the removal of all barriers between himself and GOD. And because GOD is not outside us, these layers of opacity are not only external props but also internal illusions, veils that enwrap our souls.

#### 2. Rise at night, except a little –

**And We have made the night a garment. (Q78:10)** Rather than succumbing to the darkness that veils our souls, comforting and lulling us to sleep, we are ordered to rise in worship. By breaking free of this encumbrance, we gain what is not normally granted by day.

Why did GOD create veils, darkness, and illusion – phenomena that contradict His Light and Truth? That we might rise and cast them off from us ... **except a little**. We can never be entirely free of GOD's creation, what He willed for us. We struggle towards the Light, but we accept our limitations and status as His creatures.

#### 3. A half thereof, or lessen it a bit,

**4. Or add to it; and chant with graceful measure the Qur'ān.**

The Qur'ān (i.e., the Recitation) is a book to be euphonized in sing-song style, heard in enraptured awe and admiration, absorbed by the heart, and heeded by the mind. It is an aesthetic, multisensory experience to which the body responds by standing, bowing, prostrating, trembling, and weeping. We are not meant only to assent to it, but also to surrender. Overwhelmed by its majesty and beauty, we build our lives in its shade, and see more clearly by its light.

**5. We shall surely charge you with a weighty Word.**

The Word of GOD is sonorous and poetic, yet fraught with meanings almost too hard to endure. The task of receiving and embracing the Message and then conveying it to others the right way, according to their needs and understanding, is beyond the capacity of most of us.

**6. Indeed the vigil of the night assures a stronger stance and sounder speech.**

The night was meant to be a time of rest, recuperation, and solitude, released from business and distractions. When we have cast off our daytime concerns and desires, then we are indeed freer to converse with GOD than at any other time. The quiet, secluded soul rises easily to its natural place in GOD's Presence, and finds with Him strength, insight, and serenity. These advantages may seem insignificant in the midst of our strivings for money, influence, amusement, or security, but we need this inner peace more than we realize.

**7. Certainly by day you have prolonged pursuits.**

Our daytime activities may be given over to our work or pleasure. GOD does not demand from us the unending devotions of a monastery. We are to live in the world, but with a decent detachment.

**8. Invoke your Master's Name and piously devote yourself to Him –**

What is the ultimate purpose of this call to rise and watch, this interplay of day and night, this fascinating operatic ensemble of garments, graceful tones, and passages of profound meaning? The whole intent is that we should respond to the one Performer behind all these diverse performances, celebrate His Name, and dedicate ourselves to His service. By naming Him we recognize His Personality; by serving Him, we



acknowledge His claims on us, and the potential for friendship, love, and intimacy between GOD and man.

**9. Master of the east and of the west. There is no god but He, so put your trust in Him.**

GOD is not a product of place, time, or culture. He is not defined by the mind of man, nor is there any limit to His Rule. Such Freedom and Supremacy offer a rational human being no choice but the best choice – to trust Him absolutely.

**10. Endure with patience what they say and courteously stay away from them.**

With GOD as our Companion, we need not become stirred up or hurt by the words of those who are set on their own irresponsible course. He is Master of all that, and yet lets it happen. So you too should let them be, and ignore their aimless ignorance.

**11. Leave Me to deal with the deniers, pleased with ease and plenty; let them be a while.**

The pleasures of this world are transitory, and the consequences of denial are dire and eternal, so do not begrudge them their brief enjoyments. The ominous tone here portends the coming catastrophe.

**12. With Us are fetters and a fire,**

Like any other legal authority, GOD possesses tools of enforcement. The warnings in this world are backed up by real means of correction in the next.

**13. And choking food and painful punishment,**

The average reader has trouble stomaching these explicit references to severe and usually gruesome retribution. What the average reader does not consider is, firstly, that denial of GOD is the root of every crime – and hence the greatest crime of all – for it weakens and ultimately destroys the belief in an absolute and effective moral order above man. With that in ruins, virtue crumbles and goes unrepaired and eventually unrecognized, while acts of corruption, plunder, deliberate sadism, casual destruction, and shameless deceit (e.g., by the NATO over the past thirty years) gain

power, approval, and impunity. Secondly, the average reader does not consider that GOD is the Fairest and Most Merciful of judges; He will not punish unless the guilt is great and the guilty unrepentant. Thirdly, just as denial underwrites all crime, pain underlies all penalties. A painless penalty is a joke. And some of the cruellest penalties are stored up in the justice systems of the world that forbid any form of corporal punishment; their tortures are too prolonged and exquisite for that. Fourthly and finally, the vividness of the warning is itself a mercy; a reader who refuses to take it seriously has actually refused to take GOD seriously. For GOD to administer perfect justice, He must be perfectly Powerful and perfectly Free from the ill-founded, blinkered scrutiny of those who have never felt real justice or mercy in their own lives.

**14. Upon a day the earth and highlands tremble, and the mountains turn to running sand.**

As we level up towards eternity, all events, even the slowest, approach the point of happening instantaneously. **And Our Command is single, like the glancing of an eye. (Q54:50)** The earth has always been shaking, and the mountains disintegrating, but they have been too slow for us to notice. Now, as these processes are accelerated to their 'true' speed, we become disoriented and lose the reference points wherein we felt secure. Only a timeless tie to GOD can surmount these challenges to our entire framework of materialist assumptions. This spectacle alone is traumatic enough for those who staked their souls on the world's permanence and pre-eminence.

**15. Verily We have dispatched to you a messenger to testify against you as We sent an emissary to Fir'aun.**

GOD's approach to us may need to be formal and distant, keeping with our conception of ourselves as separate, autonomous individuals. If we cannot accept His message or messengers when we have the time and space to consider them from all angles, then the direct manifestation of GOD, when there is nothing left to consider, will remove not only all doubt but the benefit of faith.

**16. But Fir'aun rebelled against the messenger, and so We seized him with a violent grasp.**

GOD is the true Authority, His Message is our canon, and His messengers are our rightful leaders. Whatever our political or social authority

may be in this world, we must never forget Who gave it to us, and the account we shall have to make for it. To deny all that merits the severest reprimand.

**17. So how will you protect yourselves, if you deny, against a day that makes the heads of children grey?**

Fir'aun could not protect himself from the lesser punishments of this life, despite his supposedly absolute authority. What cause do we have, then, to put ourselves in peril of heart-wrenching, everlasting shock and remorse merely because we preferred our ignorant stance of independence to the warnings of a well-meaning and well-informed messenger, sent by One Who has both true knowledge to give and true authority to punish?

**18. The sky is split by it – a promise, made by Him, fulfilled.**

When the material universe cannot bear the rupture of the return to GOD, how will we stand it if we are, as so many nowadays assume, nothing more than parts of that fragile fabric? Only by His Grace will we be spared the intolerable stress occasioned by His Power. And such Grace is only given to living beings who accept it.

**19. Truly this is a reminder. Anyone who wills has thus embarked upon a way towards his Lord.**

The capacity to seek GOD is latent in us all. This message is but a spark that ignites our desire into action and guides our steps.

**20. Indeed your Master knows you stand in prayer for nearly two thirds of the night, or half of it, or for a third of it, and so do some of those with you. And GOD assigns a measure to the night and day. He knew that you would not keep track of time, and so has turned to you with leniency. Read, therefore, as much of the Qur'ān as gives you ease. He knew that there would be the sick among you, others travelling in search of GOD's largesse, and others fighting for the cause of GOD, so read as much of it as gives you ease. And worship regularly, pay the tax of charity, and give to GOD a goodly loan. And anything of goodness for yourselves sent forward you will find with GOD to be increased in good and greater in reward. And ask that GOD forgive you. GOD is verily Forgiving, Merciful.**

All our acts are noted down and tallied up by GOD, and take place within the ambit of His Foreknowledge of what we will do. Hence His Commands are always merciful interventions, intended to maximize our ease in this world and our benefit in the next. What GOD terms a **loan** to Him actually was His from the outset, created by Him and loaned to us, but He designates it as ours in recognition of how we normally feel, namely that our time and wealth belong to us. Because of such habitual errors, we must also be habitual in seeking forgiveness by word and deed. Such obeisance is not for naught; it is stored up for us in our everlasting account of faith and virtue. And only GOD knows what that will be, as only He can keep it safe and add to it from His Grace.

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# INDEX

- Arabic definite nouns that begin with ‘At-’, ‘Ath-’, ‘Ad-’, ‘Adh-’, ‘Ar-’, ‘Az-’, ‘As-’, ‘Ash-’, ‘Aṣ-’, ‘Aḍ-’, ‘Aṭ-’, ‘Aẓ-’, ‘Al-’, and ‘An-’ are sequenced according to the letter following the hyphen. Thus “AL-LĀH” is found under ‘L’ rather than ‘A,’ and “*ad-dunyā*” is found under ‘D.’

- Text in the book’s poems are not referenced in this Index.

- The Index does not always reference every occurrence of a particular term listed here. Apologies for any inconvenience that may cause.

## A

Absolute / absolute(s)

- 2-4 (tb C), 12, 13, 63, 153, 154,  
168, 253 (tb NN).

- opposite of relative, 98 (tb S).

- diversity of, 148.

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Mont Redmond was born in 1958 in Sarnia, Ontario, Canada, and made a career out of translating and interpreting between English and Indonesian, Malay, and Thai. His only previous book of significance was *Wondering into Thai Culture*, first published in 1998. His current whereabouts are uncertain, but he has been reported as saying that constructive feedback via [redmondmont@gmail.com](mailto:redmondmont@gmail.com) might still be welcome. He left instructions that this be inscribed upon his gravestone:

*I lit this world until the hour  
Which You ordained that I go out –  
De-lighted to dispel the doubt  
That Yours is all the light, and power.*